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# editorial

A magazine like *Hi-Fi+* doesn't have regular round-table editorial meetings because our reviewers are scattered to the four winds, and seldom see one another except at the occasional audio show or press launch. So, the chances of some disease sweeping through the team is slim. This month, though, contagion spread through the writers like the magazine was a plague ship.

In the week running up to publication, planned reviews were thin on the ground. Frantic telephone calls and emails followed, often a cavalcade of coughing, sneezing, spluttering, and a comparison of symptoms. I spent a lot of February sounding like Hal Douglas (the late, great King of "In a world..." movie voice overs), and I was one of the healthier ones!

The reason for tearing down the fourth wall here is simple. We hoped to cover many products this month, products that are currently sitting in listening rooms temporarily retasked as sick rooms! So, that amazing ELAC Debut B5 loudspeaker we were expecting this month... well, it's been pushed back to next issue. This also gave rise to a slightly less balanced spread of products than usual.

This last point is fascinating, though. Because, with a few notable exceptions, the products we tested were mostly at a far more affordable and attainable level than usual. Our high-end grouping, placing products in the thousands to tens of thousands of pounds has been replaced by a number of products that stayed in the hundreds. Setting aside the *Marie Celeste* like nature of the editorial team this month, I think this might be

continuing a trend seen at CES this year.

In other news, March was traditionally something of a quiet month for audio events, but not anymore. Those of you reading this in the US should check out the CanJam So-Cal event on March 19 and 20 at the Westin South Coast Plaza in Costa Mesa, California. For more details, go to: [www.head-fi.org/t/784296/canjam-socal-2016-march-19-20-2016](http://www.head-fi.org/t/784296/canjam-socal-2016-march-19-20-2016). Meanwhile, those in the UK fresh from the Bristol Sound & Vision Show should visit the Bath AudioFest at the Bath Royal Literary and Scientific Institution, in Queens Square, which runs on March 18 and 19. Details can be found here: [www.coolgales.com/bath-audiofest](http://www.coolgales.com/bath-audiofest)

Finally, congratulations to our lucky winners of the Mad Scientist cable competition. Cliff Perry of Harlington in the UK wins a set of the excellent YANAM interconnects, while Chris DeBrango of Sherman Oaks in California wins a set of ATOH cables. Well done!

Alan Sircom  
editor@hifiplus.com

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Or email them to [editor@hifiplus.com](mailto:editor@hifiplus.com)

# incoming!

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## LETTER OF THE MONTH WINS A DRAGONFLY

Both AudioQuest and *Hi-Fi+* are passionate about music and the sound it makes. We know what makes a good audio experience, and we know what makes it better. Most modern audio equipment is good, but with the right attitude, right advice, and the right components, the sound it delivers can move from 'good' to 'great' to 'fantastic'. AudioQuest has to deal with a lot of queries regarding audio systems, because almost everything in an audio system is connected with a cable. The company has amassed a wealth of information on a range of topics in audio, both in general terms and with a team comprising keen, specialist audio experts willing to impart their expertise.

Which is why we've teamed up with the good folks at AudioQuest to award the letter of the month a free AudioQuest Dragonfly.

### Flight Club

Following on from Timothy Porter's question in issue 132 ('Custom In-Air Monitors'), I've gone down a different route and use noise-cancelling headphones when travelling. I use a pair of Bose QuietComfort 25s and I find them extremely comfortable, even on long-haul flights. I'm perfectly happy with them for flights, but their noise cancelling doesn't seem as effective on my daily commute through London's Underground. I've long wondered why, and – while I'm asking – precisely how does 'noise cancellation' work and how does it differ from 'sound isolation'?

**Jeremy Hayes, via email**

*Noise cancellation is an active process that uses little microphones in the headphones or earphones. These pick up the ambient sound around you, and essentially turn it out of phase, and then play it back through the headphones along with your regular music signal. Audio retailers have known of this effect for decades, and use it to run in a pair of box loudspeakers before demonstrations – if you wire a pair of loudspeakers with one speaker in phase, one with the terminals connected out of phase, put the loudspeakers close together tweeter to tweeter and play white noise through the loudspeakers, they can be played loud without sounding loud, because the white noise generated by one speaker is cancelled out by its neighbour. The same applies to headphone use.*

*The limitation to such a system is it tends to work with steady-state noise, like hiss and hum, white or pink noise, or the steady drone of an aircraft's jets in the cabin. Once you begin to introduce 'transients' into the mix, such as the uneven clattering sound of an Underground train on its tracks, it becomes far harder for a digital signal processing*

*system to record, invert phase, and replay the transient in time to cancel it out. Modern systems are significantly better than their predecessors at coping with a wider range of ambient noises, and continue to improve, so check back in a couple of years time to see just how the state of the noise cancelling art has progressed.*

*By way of contrast, sound isolation needs no active electronics, and the name gives the game away. Sound isolating headphones and earphones are packed with material that blocks the ingress of all sounds from outside getting to your ears. The most extreme example are ear defenders used in potentially hearing-damaging environments, but precisely the same technology is used in audio devices, but in a lighter package for domestic users. The main advantage to sound isolation is it's equally effective on all ambient noise. The main disadvantage is that includes anyone you might want to talk to!*

**Robert Hay – AudioQuest**



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### ► A file too far?

After an initial unsuccessful dip into digital audio some seven years ago I decided to give digital audio a second chance last year; this time without any regrets. Encouraged by several good reviews – including yours – I opted for the iFi DSD Micro DAC as my weapon of choice.

It took several months to rip my CDs in a lossless format, and I enjoy listening to them through Roon on my Mac Mini into the aforementioned iFi DAC, and then to an ATC pre-amp and ATC active 50s tower loudspeakers.

Through this system it is obvious that SACD equivalent downloads sound better than the equivalent in CD quality. However, the Law of Diminishing Returns applies to higher quality digital downloads: double the download time and file size results in an ever decreasing performance improvement.

Does Quad or Octa DSD really outperform DSD or 2x DSD? Is there an optimum?

**Walter Kolkman, Shenzhen, via email.**

*The Law of Diminishing Returns effects DSD in more ways than one. Stepping away from the sound quality question for a moment, the amount of available material gets ever smaller the higher the grade of DSD file you download. When it comes to Octa DSD, you are pursuing a goal that demands the absolute bleeding edge of audio equipment, in order to play a handful of files of dubious quality and provenance.*

*I'm all for pushing the envelope of audio performance, but I suspect the DSD arms race is ultimately more about chasing ever better specifications than the quest for better sound. I would stay at the Dual DSD level until there is enough of a groundswell of higher-level music to justify the upgrade – Ed*

### I'm too sexy for my iPhone

In your last issue, Derek Johns made some interesting points about hi-fi returning to its sexy past ('Wine, women, and song!', Hi-Fi+ 132). However, I think he's looking at the problem from the position of someone a generation too old to look in any way 'sexy'. Those cool movies from the 1960s and 1970s, where auteurs came out of advertsing and made slick cinematic masterpieces is 40 or even 50 years out of date. The movie business is struggling to make anything successful, unless it is almost entirely targeted at a teenager! TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines are all suffering the same fate – they still appeal to an ageing audience, but to the average 25 year old (who has spent all of their adult life welded to a smartphone), the affairs of digital immigrants (those of us over 35) are alien and of no interest to them. Making hi-fi 'sexy' to a twentysomething is about as impossible as our parents trying to generate an interest in gathering the family around the radio.

However, the idea of combining good audio with good food is an excellent one, because everyone at any age loves a good meal!

**Dan Winchester, via email**

*Spoken like a true foodie, Dan! While I agree with your ideas, and know from personal professional experience how difficult it is for an inherently 'digital alien' concept – like a paper-based magazine about high fidelity audio – to appeal to digital natives, I also think there is a major change in the air.*

*It's time audio re-engaged with people under the age of 40, and in part it's doing that through the mediums of digital streaming and 'in-head audio'. Moreover, brands that have successfully grasped the importance of social media seem to be thriving and surviving better than their peers! But don't count out the significance of mainstream mass media, too. The days of the 'water cooler moment' may be consigned to the past, but there are still millions of eyes glued to TV and cinema screens every single day. Ultimately, all these methods of improving audio's lot are worth exploring, except possibly a Big McIntosh with fries! – Ed*

### Happy!

I don't have a question to ask. I don't have a big statement to make about the nature of reality, the future of audio, or anything else. I just bought my first real 'hi-fi' system (Arcam DAC and amp, and a pair of second-hand KEF LS50s), and I just want to say how happy it's making me! I've never enjoyed listening to my music this much, and I think people can get so caught up in the arguments around the topic, they lose sight of that pleasure.

**Jim Gibson, via email**

*I agree, and keep enjoying the music because that's what it's all about! – Ed*





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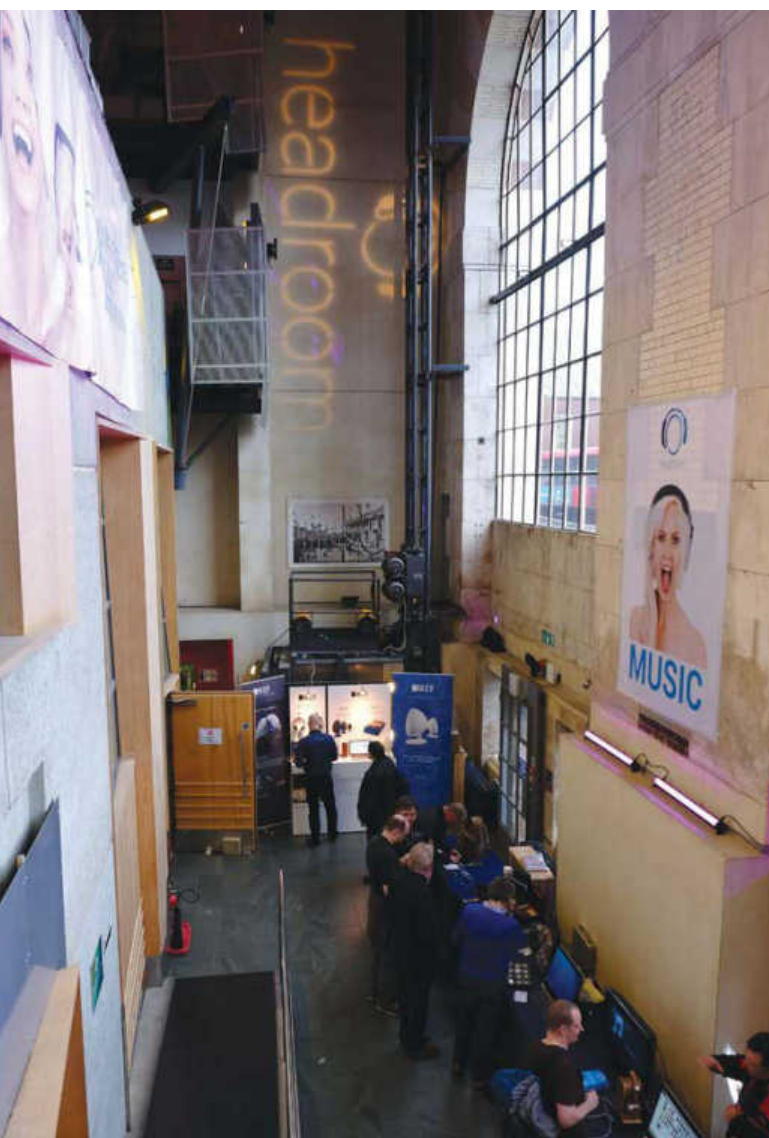
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# SHOW REPORT

## Headroom Show

by Alan Sircom



Melco was showing off its £7,000 40th anniversary version of the N1Z. Just 40 models will be made, sporting a raft of improvements over the basic model – everything from twice the internal storage down to new feet. Good news for US Melco followers, too: although models bearing a SSD drive still cannot be sold in America, there will soon be a N1Z-H60 model, which includes 6TB of conventional HDD in the N1Z chassis. This is expected to cost £3,500. The existing 4TB HDD N1A and 1TB SSD N1A will continue.

Now in its second year, the Headroom show ran at the end of January at the Metropolis Studios in Chiswick, West London. With almost every exhibitor at last year's show turning up again for this year, and more companies than ever trying to squeeze into the limited studio space, the show was filled to bursting. No wonder – it's a friendly, inviting show run by people who are genuinely passionate about their music and their products, and enthusiasts who are enthusiastic, not simply there to score points. For those more used to conventional audio shows, this is a more exciting and dynamic place: among the larger, more established audio shows, arguably only Bristol and Munich get close to providing the same buzz.

Once again, there were a lot of products that were already seen at CES or at previous shows, so we decided not to go over freshly trodden ground. Nevertheless, there were some surprises and new product launches, as well as some little-seen gems worth talking about.

For more details about the Headroom Show, please go to [www.hifipius.com](http://www.hifipius.com) +







A relatively new name on the headphone scene, the Kennerton brand from Russia makes a large range of earphones, headphones, amps, and DACs that go from high-value to high-performance.



One of the most significant new products at the show, Stax announced a new Earspeaker and a wholly new combination Earspeaker/Energiser system, both at keen price points. To the left is the £1,395 SRS-5100 system, comprising SR-L500 earspeaker and SRM-353X energiser directly below the SR-L500. The new SRM-353X (available separately for £895) is the new entry-point for Stax' top line of electrostatic amplifiers. The SR-L700 Earspeaker (right) features a new enclosure in the Lambda design, with technology first seen in the SR-007 and SR-009. All for £995!

Not a lot was known about these two new lower-cost headphones from Final, save that they bear a striking similarity in design, build, and even sound to the considerably more expensive Sonorous VII and X models in the same product range!



Ultrasone's £699 on ear Edition M uses the S-Logic driver placement seen on the company's more exotic models, but serves it up in a smaller, more sensitive package that is ideal for on the go listeners with smartphones.



Chord Electronics was running its popular demonstration of its trio of 'good', 'better', 'best' DACs with the Mojo, Hugo, and DAVE. But in the same room, Chord supremo John Franks was more taken by another Hugo, one that is owned and used by the studio itself. Ed Sheeran's X was said to be mixed on exactly that DAC in the control room. ▶

beyerdynamic now has one of the strongest high-end ranges it has ever pitched, with a prototype of the revised T5p alongside the latest T1 and all-new DT1770 Pro. New drivers, removable headphone cables, a better headband and a host of 'Gen 2' technology learned from the T1 should filter through to the revised £849 T5p headphone.



The Chord Company has developed a cable that is both flexible enough to work in a headphone setting, and yet offers the advantages seen in the company's best loudspeaker cables. The secret seems to be that the twisted pair cable uses an extruded carbon-fibre shielding, is expected to cost between £200-£300, and fits all current connectors.



With all the shouting about the new HD800S and the (new) Orpheus, the HD 630VB has been almost overlooked. This £400 closed back addition to Sennheiser's HD range is 'all about that bass', with a variable control on the left ear-cup to adjust bass boost or cut.



It's been a long time coming, but the ADL Stratos DAC/ADC recorder/headphone amp/preamp has finally made it! It changed a little since first seen in prototype form back in 2013, but the new £995 Stratos is densely packed, with a phono input and up to QuadDSD replay performance.



Electromod had hoped for a whole load of new Schiit, with the latest DACs and amplifiers from the brand. It's perhaps an expression of the brand's success that someone in the courier company had other ideas and the hoped for delivery was missing. Nevertheless, this gave the company the perfect opportunity to show off its high-performance, low cost line, including the £150 Vali 2 tube amplifier with matching £140 Modi 2 Uber DAC. Small, cute, and affordable... what's not to like?





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# Magico S7 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Alan Sircom

**N**ow that Magico is in its second decade, it's time to both extend and redefine its lines. This can be a difficult task: the company's S and Q lines have crossing points and products like the new S7 can cause some 'which is better' confusion. This is understandable because the Magico S7 is a damn good loudspeaker, and the Magico Q5 is a damn good loudspeaker, and they aren't priced that far apart in the high-end's upper slopes.

The S7 is the new top of the S-series, Magico's more rounded (in all senses), more attainable line. The S7 was the first of Magico's standard line of loudspeakers to feature the new diamond-coated beryllium tweeter, which is now filtering through the rest of the range. It's a three-way tower loudspeaker, with the aforementioned 25mm tweeter, a wholly new 150mm midrange unit, and three 250mm aluminium-coned bass drivers. Both mid and treble are what might be considered 'headline' worthy drive units in their own right, and draw heavily from the M-Project, Magico's limited edition, cost-no-object anniversary loudspeaker.

It would be extremely easy to dismiss that tweeter on first look. We've had diamond tweeters before and we've had beryllium tweeters before, so what's the big deal? Well, we've only seen a diamond-coated beryllium tweeter *once* before, and that was in the M-Project. This is an ambitious project for any company, because the two are not natural partners. Diamond tweeters are notoriously difficult to use in audio, because their installation redefines 'kid glove' treatment – basically, look at a diamond tweeter in the wrong way and it will shatter. Once installed and away from prying fingers, it's a dream material to work with, but I've spoken with designers who use diamond tweeters about using the material as a coating for beryllium, and they go through a few seconds of thinking that is a great idea, then they start rocking from side to side, pulling their hair out, and require restraining, medicating, and a 48-hour section. It's not pretty.

OK, so M-Project is not the Manhattan Project, but Magico found a way to use diamond as a coating for beryllium, which is in itself another dream material to work with (if you can work in a clean room with breathing apparatus – beryllium is safe to use as a tweeter material, but highly toxic to inhale when making those tweeters). This is impressive stuff, and

what's truly impressive is it is genuine trickle-down technology; first to the S7 and – by the time you read this – in the new versions of other S loudspeakers, including the S1 (Mk II), the first rung on the Magico floorstanders ladder.

A lot of hi-fi loudspeaker companies, starting with KEF in the 1960s, make a big thing of material science, and how they use the latest technology in the construction of their loudspeaker drivers. Often, however, that 'latest technology' is decades old elsewhere, but new to the audio business. In the case of the S7's midrange unit, you really are buying cutting edge technology, because this is one of the first practical commercial appearances of graphene. First discovered in 2004 by Andre Geim and Konstantin Novoselov at the University of Manchester, graphene is a two-dimensional material made of a single layer of carbon atoms arranged in a lattice. It won Geim and Novoselov knighthoods and Nobel Prizes (interestingly, Geim is the first individual to win both a Nobel Prize and an Ig Nobel Prize, the latter for levitating a frog with magnets in 2000). Graphene's practical use is only now being realised, with the material appearing in designs of future semiconductors and batteries. Actual products in production that use graphene are currently exceptionally rare, with just an extremely expensive toner for printing and the midrange units in Magico loudspeakers being the only commercial applications thus far.

The reason for the paucity of graphene in the marketplace comes down to one simple determinant – availability. The material is still made in 'laboratory-conditions' volumes, and that makes for both an extraordinarily expensive material, and something that cannot scale for significant numbers... yet. However, the reason it's so interesting and why graphene will be the material of the moment soon is that it is outstandingly strong, an excellent conductor of heat and electrons, and capable of creating very stiff, very light structures. In the case of the S7's midrange unit, the cone material is a mix of multi-wall carbon nanotubes and 'nanographene', and the resultant cone is said to be 20% lighter and an astonishing 300% stiffer than previous designs.

After all that unobtainium in the treble and midranges, the three 250mm bass drivers are 'simply' aluminium coned affairs. That being said, the trio have extremely powerful magnets and those super-stiff cones have an impressive ►







- ▶ 15mm of linear movement, which is why they can deliver sound pressure levels of 120dB at 1m at 50Hz.

The drive units are impressive, but the cabinet and the crossover are hardly unimpressive. The S series uses a curved extruded aluminium cabinet and more conventional cross bracing, when compared to the Q models internal ladderframe construction. This allows the mid and top sections to be almost completely chambered and therefore isolated from the bass section. A cabinet that has 13mm thick aluminium curved side walls, solid aluminium front baffle and rear panel, and sits on a very heavy outrigger spike arrangement, is not exactly 'just another box', though. The S models have the ability to be finished in a range of six M-Cast powder and six M-Coat high gloss finishes at a premium, as well as a 'none more black' 2001-style monolithic black as standard. A magnetic grill can be used, although Magico recommends removing it for critical listening.

Magico uses its own ESXO (Elliptical Symmetry Crossover) network in all its designs. This has an accelerated filter slope for each drive unit, allowing each unit to do its allotted task unimpeded by the other drivers in the system. This demands carefully selected components, and that's why where other speakers might use Mundorf capacitors in the crossover, Magico goes to Mundorf to specify unique MCap designs specifically for the brand. As ever, this can be put down to Magico going the extra mile, and then a few hundred miles beyond that.

Although the S7 is a flexible design in terms of load and prospective amplifier partners, the reality is the S7 is made to

rock out with a powerhouse amp feeding it. You can make some beautiful sounds with a well-engineered 50W valve amplifier (Magico demonstrated the S1 [mk II] with Convergent Audio Technology power amps in Las Vegas this year, almost as a 'screw you' to the naysayers who think Magico lives for solid state). But for the real deal, you need top-notch amplifier muscle. And Constellation Audio springs to mind, because they are perfect partners and because (in the UK at least), that's the partnership you are most likely to hear. Coupled with a Perseus/Centaur II combination from Constellation's Performance series, the Magico S7 sings, and sings with a beautiful voice, that can also really kick!

A lot of high-end loudspeakers are initially impressive, only to pall after a while. Others are initially unimpressive, but ultimately satisfy in the long term. A tiny number are initially impressive and ultimately satisfying, and they are the best speakers money can buy. The S7 is one such loudspeaker.

Why it combines the initially impressive with the sustaining is because it has an uncanny ability to play as well at polite listening levels as it does when it's played at full thrash and all points in between. So, you go through the early "impress me!" phase, where you will end up playing something a bit 'fruity' (for me, that's 'La Grange' by ZZ Top on *Tres Hombres* [London], played at 'air drummer' levels), and then gradually wick the volume back to sensible, then wig out, calm down, headbang again, chill out, and oscillate until you find your happy medium level. The S7 doesn't just follow along with this, it invites you to just keep oscillating, playing music loud and soft, finding the right level for each piece of music. Of ▶



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► course, this happens because the speaker doesn't put a foot wrong tonally, from the deepest bass to the highest treble, it's precise, powerful, and performance orientated!

The bass is particularly interesting, because it doesn't necessarily draw attention to itself, but it's there in massive reserve when called upon. When you play a breathy singer/songwriter, the S7 sounds all the world like a fast little two-way sealed box speaker. Move over to some dub reggae or electronica and it's like those little speakers were replaced with a jackhammer. Few loudspeakers 'scale' like the S7!

The loudspeaker is also satisfyingly detailed and extremely dynamic: two attributes that combine to draw out the most from even the darkest recesses of your music collection. OK, not the darkest recesses – that album by the Handless Organist is probably best left in the racks – but you really can throw everything your record collection has at the S7 and it comes out shiny, new, insightful, and interesting. You remember why you bought or downloaded that album you had all but forgotten. Even lo-fi Americana like Bonnie 'Prince' Billy's 'I See A Darkness' from the album from the same name [Palace] is transformed. Although I don't recommend actually playing this through the S7, because the music is so harrowing, you might end up on suicide watch! Joking aside, this shows precisely why the S7 is so extremely good: it gets past the recording quality and straight into the core of the music in the way more 'excitable' loudspeakers do, but it also does so with all the detail and precision for which Magico is justly famous.

There's a Magico meme that I kind of started – no magic in the Magico – which was actually a compliment that lost its way. Magico loudspeakers are fundamentally honest, wide-open transducers: what astonishes you about their performance is it's *not* their performance. Instead, it's the sound of the musicians, and you almost immediately realise that what we sometimes see as 'magical' in loudspeakers is often simply a set of nicely tuned distortions. The S7 still has that Magico integrity to its sound, but it also produces a sound that is magical. Not in a 'smoke-and-mirrors' way, but you will listen enrapt for hours on end to these loudspeakers and come away smiling. Smiling in part because you still have that close connection with the recording studio, but also because the music is just enjoyable. This isn't a volume thing – although it can get loud – it's almost an atavistic thing. Sounds this deep, this open, and this civilised shouldn't be this fun according to audio folklore. Magico S7 begs to differ.

So, which is better... S7 or Q5? The two are different products for different end users, but that's sitting on the fence. It was not logistically possible to hear the two side by side in anything like the same time-frame (that's not simply a set-up

issue, there are only a finite number of these loudspeakers in circulation in a country like the UK at any given time, and while sitting in front of a pair of S7s, every pair of Q5s in the country were already installed in listeners homes). In a way, and this is going from memory, the Q5 is the more 'correct' loudspeaker in that it is extremely accurate and faithful to what was laid down in the studio. The S7, in contrast, has a bit more magic in its presentation. If I had a pair of Q5's, the S7 is probably not sufficiently different to justify the switch, but if I were listening to a Q5 and an S7 today, the S7 would be the one I'd take home. Although at 136kg per loudspeaker 'take home' probably involves a team of piano movers!

Magico seems incapable of sitting still and resting on its laurels. This is a great thing for audio enthusiasts, because each successive model, and each successive iteration of previous models, has been a step in the right direction. But amid all of that, the Magico S7 represents something special. It's the Magico that puts the word 'magic' into that name at last, and effectively silences some of the counter arguments used against the marque. It's that perfect combination of precision music listening tool and fun musical warhammer that we all want. Put simply, one of the best loudspeakers ever, and very highly recommended! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three way, sealed box floorstanding loudspeaker

**Driver Complement:** 1 x 25mm MBD26 Tweeter,  
1 x 150mm MCG8005 Graphene midrange,  
3 x 250mm aluminium cone bass units

**Frequency Response:** 20 Hz–50 kHz

**Sensitivity:** 89dB

**Impedance:** 4 Ohms

**Recommended Power:** 50 - 1,000 watts

**Finishes:** Black, MCast (six colours, powder coat), MCoat  
(six colours high gloss paint finish)

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 136.4x38.8x44.5cm

**Weight:** 136 kg per loudspeaker

**Price:** £63,000 (MCast) per pair, £69,000 (MCoat) per pair

**Manufactured by:** Magico LLC

**URL:** [www.magico.net](http://www.magico.net)

**Distributed by:** Absolute Sounds

**Tel:** +44 (0)208 971 3909

**URL:** [www.absolutesounds.com](http://www.absolutesounds.com)

# Tannoy Revolution XT 8F

by Steve Dickinson

I first heard the Tannoy Revolution XT 8F at the *Bristol Sound and Vision* show in February 2015 and it was one of those moments where, even given the unfamiliar context of a show environment and somebody else's system, there was something about these modestly priced floorstanders that caught my attention. A few months on, a review pair arrived and, in the context of my own room and system, that 'something' was still there.

The XT 8F is the largest in Tannoy's Revolution XT series, the larger of two floorstanding designs. It uses a version of Tannoy's familiar dual-concentric driver where the tweeter is set in the throat of the mid/bass unit, utilising the diaphragm of the larger unit to partly horn load its output. The advantages are in efficiency, imaging and coherence (all frequencies emanating from, effectively, a point source).

Of course, a loudspeaker retailing at £1,299 per pair is not going to be able to utilise the expensive drivers in Tannoy's high-end Prestige or Definition ranges. Instead, the drivers for the XT series are all new and, inexpensive or not, they utilise some innovative technology. Both XT drive units cleverly share the same magnet, and utilise a sophisticated waveguide, incorporating a torus-shaped diaphragm for the high frequencies and an 'Ogive' phase plug, for better time alignment and coherence with the bass/mid element.

The '8' in the model name denotes that this loudspeaker uses the 8" (200mm) version of this 'Omnimagnet' dual-concentric driver, coupled with a similar-sized bass-only driver. Tannoy says the new driver design, while saving useful space, also offers improvements to high-frequency directivity, phase-coherence, dynamic headroom, and overall accuracy of reproduction and imaging. The cabinets derive, broadly, from the previous Revolution range's trapezoidal cross-section and the floorstanders employ a reflex-coupled dual cavity design. The port exits in a forward-facing slot at the foot of the cabinet, flanked by two nicely-trimmed chromed pillars and atop a neatly-machined plinth with four chunky, knurled adjustments for the spiked feet. The overall effect, in walnut stained real wood veneer, is classy and smart, and could easily pass for a considerably more expensive model on looks alone.

What impressed me when I first heard them was the degree of expressiveness they brought out in the music.

Dynamics were unconstrained, and that familiar Tannoy openness and freedom was there. Not everybody will enjoy Tannoy's uninhibited, somewhat loose-limbed approach, but if you're one of those who enjoys a speaker that is not afraid to let its hair down, then the XT 8Fs deliver a lot of what makes the Prestige and Definition ranges so prized in terms of sheer communication of the intent behind the music.

Stanley Clarke's 'Soldier' and 'Fulani' from *The Stanley Clarke Band* [Hears Up] was fast, dynamic, and exciting on the XT 8F, with much of the speed and impact his bass playing has live. Lots of loudspeakers impress with a deep and powerful bass, but to properly appreciate Stanley Clarke you need a loudspeaker which can also do fast and tuneful bass, with oodles of attack. The XT 8Fs don't disappoint in this area, and I suspect it is the integration with the high frequency output that contributes much to its success in this particular regard. Bass is certainly full, rich, and satisfying, with none of that wooliness or flabbiness you can get when a loudspeaker has perhaps been voiced to keep a lid on things. The overall effect, in terms of impact and scale, is considerably more engaging and entertaining than some of its peers.

Piano is rich in tone and powerful in effect, too: 'I wish I knew how it would feel to be free' by the Billy Taylor Trio, *Music Keeps Us Young* [Arkadia Jazz], had a sonorous and expansive piano, with agile and tuneful bass registers, and a strong sense of mass without being ponderous or heavy. That said, the piece just 'is what it is', enjoyable but without much sense of a musical journey to a destination. If it has a fault, the Tannoy probably lacks a little of the ability to convey the subtlest messages in the music. But then, it gives you much more than many others do of the big picture, in terms of space, freedom, and dynamics.

In some respects, the Tannoy comes across as the antithesis to something like the, broadly similarly-priced, Monitor Audio Silver 8s that I reviewed a few issues back. The MAs are very good loudspeakers that rarely put a foot far out of line. In comparison, the Tannoys are somewhat more bullish and, perhaps, a little uncouth, but they sure know how to have a good time. If the MAs are a well-trained Labrador, honest, reliable, and solid, then the Tannoys might be a Springer Spaniel, loads of energy, fun, and boundless enthusiasm, but prone to knocking over the occasional vase. Neither speaker ►







*“I’ll take fun and a bit wayward over safe and secure every time, unless we’re talking brain surgery.”*

- has the monopoly on rightness, nor any fatal flaws, but you’d be unlikely to find that both will float your boat equally, and much will depend on personal taste and preference.

The downside to the Tannoys’ ebullience is a certain lack of finesse. I have a number of ‘system-killer’ tracks, one of which – Jack de Johnette’s ‘Ahmad the Terrible’ from *Album Album* [ECM] – I tried with the Tannoys in place. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t inflict this track on a modestly-priced component, it just feels unfair, but there was something about the Tannoys which hinted that they might not, in fact, fall apart at the seams. True, the presentation was a little shrill and slightly disjointed, compared to my regular Focal 1028Bes (which, let us not forget, are over four times the price), it didn’t really settle into its groove, and the band didn’t gel together quite the way I know they can. All that said, it did exhibit very good dynamics and got a lot closer to the essence of the music than many a loudspeaker I’ve tried it on, much to its credit. It probably serves to highlight what I’d categorise as the compromise in the Tannoy design; a mild lack of polish and subtlety (if *Downton Abbey* had a pair, they would probably remain below stairs). In a similar way, Melody Gardot’s ‘Amalia’ from *The Absence* [Decca] flowed in a very natural way, but lacked the ultimate sense of intimacy I was looking for. All that said, I’d rather have something come over as a little larger than life, than as halfway to the grave.

It’s not a high-end giant-killer, but it more than hints at what is possible, which is more than I can say for a fair few of its peers. It may seem as though I’ve focussed on the flaws rather than the good points, and it is important to keep in mind that any flaws are mostly shown in relief because most of the other stuff is entirely natural and doesn’t draw attention to itself. So, you perceive the really good stuff, the dynamics, the scale, and the ability to paint a big and interesting picture, and you get to know the niggles too, but the stuff which just quietly gets on with things doesn’t merit discussion. Me? I’ll take fun and a bit wayward over safe and secure every time, unless we’re talking brain surgery.

The XT 8Fs deliver huge dollops of the important stuff when it comes to conveying the essence of one’s music collection. Music flows in a very natural way, and retains a good sense of rhythm, when so coupled with the unconstrained dynamics and speed. That they may overplay their hand at ►



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*“Good manners are less of a social asset than, perhaps the knack of knowing how to have a good time.”*

- times, while being a little impressionistic when you get down to the finer points, is not really to be deprecated, at this price, and I have to give Tannoy a lot of credit for refusing to play it safe with this design.

I guess, when it comes down to it, I want my system to entertain, not to impress. I'd like it to do both, of course, but that tends to cost considerably bigger bucks than are being asked for here. Any loudspeaker selling at the price point of the Tannoy, or even considerably more, is going to have some defining compromises, and the temptation for many makers will be to take care not to offend. That might have made sense if you were making hi-fi in Jane Austen's day, but these days, good manners are less of a social asset than, perhaps, the knack of knowing how to have a good time. Actually, I suspect Jane Austen knew that too, and I wouldn't be at all surprised if, like me, she found the Tannoy XT 8Fs much to her liking. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Three-way, floorstanding speaker with bass reflex enclosure

**Driver complement:** one dual concentric driver comprising 25 mm Linear PEI dome with Torus Ogive WaveGuide and Omnimagnet technology, and 200 mm multi-fibre paper 44 mm voice coil; one 200 mm multi-fibre paper pulp cone with rubber surround and 44 mm edge wound voice coil

**Crossover frequencies:** 250Hz and 1.8kHz, passive low loss 2nd order low pass, 1st order high pass

**Frequency response:** 34Hz-32kHz (-6dB)

**Impedance:** 8 Ohms nominal

**Sensitivity:** 91dB for 1 Watt at 1 Metre

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 1080 x 317 x 345 mm

**Weight:** 19.9Kg/each

**Finishes:** Dark Walnut; Medium Oak

**Price:** £1,299/pair

**Manufacturer:** Tannoy Limited

**Tel:** 44 (0)1236 702503

**URL:** [www.tannoy.co.uk](http://www.tannoy.co.uk)







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# Heed Enigma 5 floorstanding loudspeakers

by Roy Gregory

**H**eed Audio's story starts around 30 years ago. Back then Hungary was one of the more liberal of the Soviet 'republics' encouraging its population to start businesses and manufacture products. The nascent Heed Audio wanted to distribute UK audio products in Hungary – those of Rega, Royd and Ion Systems – and circumvented import controls by bringing kits of parts and assembling them “in-country”. It was a neat and successful solution that ran for nearly a decade, until Ion Systems collapsed. Heed's reaction was to simply carry on as before, building the products from scratch rather than from kits and the Obelisk series is still a lynchpin of its product range.

Over the years Heed has augmented their electronics ranges with a number of their own speaker designs, as eclectic and individual as the shoebox amplifiers they play them with. But one glance will tell you that these are no clones of classic UK models. In fact, if they relate to anything else at all, it's probably a pair of Shahinian speaker models, the Compass and Starter. In a world where genuinely novel speaker designs are rare indeed, Heed's Enigma is a product whose design ethos certainly lives up to its name.

The Enigma 5 is a small floorstanding speaker with its two drivers positioned on a radically sloped, top-mounted baffle. They point not quite straight at the ceiling! It's rectangular footprint and sharp edges fly in the face of current fashion, as does the absence of outrigger feet. In fact, you could describe the Enigma 5 as “old-fashioned”, except that its wide-dispersion, pseudo-omni approach has never actually been in fashion. But from its plain-Jane drivers to its outwardly simple box and smallish volume, it's hard to escape the first impression that the \$3,500 price-tag looks seriously expensive. However, look a little closer, particularly when it comes to the bass loading and you soon realise that there's a lot more to this speaker than the modest face that meets the casual eye.

The drivers are both built to Heed's specifications by Morel; a 150mm polymer coned bass-mid being paired with a 25mm hand-coated Acuflex soft-dome tweeter. Closely

spaced on that upward facing baffle, there's nothing here to help explain the speaker's price. The clue comes in Heed's description of the bass loading, referred to as TMR, reflecting what they explain as a hybrid transmission-line/reflex loading. Quite how you combine reflex and transmission line loading is something Heed won't explain, but I'm guessing what we have here is a graduated or partially vented quarter wave, an arrangement that would involve an internal baffle running diagonally from the top of the cabinet almost to its bottom. Yet despite the internal woodwork, the Heeds are surprisingly light in weight, suggesting that they use a thin wall, critically braced structure.

The other thing about this unusual bass loading is that it works. Slowly evolved across a number of different speaker models, Heed claims that its approach delivers unusual bass depth, weight, and agility and that's a claim I'm happy to endorse. Indeed, perhaps the most “old-fashioned” thing about this speaker is its way with pace, rhythm, and timing, staples of the UK flat-earth agenda. What it doesn't fall into is the “full speed ahead and damn tonality” trap that typified so many early flat-earth favourites.

Despite unfashionably low 86dB sensitivity, the Enigma 5 is an easy 8 Ohm load, meaning that in another break with flat-earth tradition, it's far from difficult to drive. I used it to some considerable effect on the end of my Icon Audio Stereo 60 KT88-equipped tube amp, a combination that made the most of the speaker's expansive sense of acoustic space and rhythmic flow. But things got really interesting once I hooked up the Naim Audio NAP300DR, driven by the same company's NAC-N272 dac/preamp. Fed files from the Naim UnitiServe and discs by the CEC TL-03 transport, the result was music with an infectious, insistent appeal – the sort of performance that you can't just leave running in the background because it keeps snagging your attention.

A considerable amount of my early audio life was spent struggling to create a system that could manage the measured tread and musical weight of early Cure albums (notably *Seventeen Seconds* and *Faith*) without sounding ponderous, leaden or sluggish. If the Enigma 5 had been around back ▶







*“Walk into any room where the Enigma 5s are at work and you can almost feel the tension drop.”*

most obvious indication of just where this speaker's priorities lie, their concern with musical pattern and structure over the minutiae of hi-fi niceties. Given that slightly distant, mid-hall perspective and the drivers employed, it should come as no surprise that the Enigma 5 is neither the most detailed, immediate, nor obvious speaker you'll have heard. However, what it is instead (a quality that it shares with the Shahinians) is one of the most naturally communicative, relaxed, and relaxing speakers you'll ever hear. Walk into any room where the Enigma 5s are at work and you can almost feel the tension drop away; their calm, uncluttered, and unflustered influence allowing you to hear straight into the music, without effort, difficulty, or confusion. There's a lovely “what you hear is what you get” quality to their presentation that makes perfect sense and obviates the need to look for more.

Any room: why any room? Because the Heeds, with their pseudo-omni dispersion seem far less affected by room dimensions and acoustics than more directly radiating speaker designs. One of the things that has always struck me about their performance at shows is just how their sound is so consistently enjoyable, irrespective of room size, décor, or other factors. At home, I used them not in the listening room but upstairs in the lounge/second listening room (the description depends on who you ask). This room is unusual in that it's narrow but encloses a large volume and is excellently vented. It also has floor to ceiling glass down one of its long walls. Over the years, I've developed a set of acoustic treatments that might not pass muster with *Homes And Gardens*, but make the most of the room's advantages and minimize its problems. Installing the Heeds, I also automatically installed the various panels and other devices, set the blinds just so and carried on as before. However, after a week or two, visitors meant I needed to remove the treatment, so that the room could revert to a more ‘normal’ appearance. The speakers of course, stayed put. But what surprised me was just how little their sound suffered as a result of removing all my carefully arranged reflectors, absorbers, and chokes. Bringing them back, one piece at a time certainly added a greater sense of focus and separation to the presentation, but the sense of musical energy, coherence, and intelligibility barely altered; the gains in definition seeming almost peripheral to proceedings.

► then my search would have been considerably shorter. As I've already stated, Heed's claims regarding the weight and agility of this speaker's bottom end are well founded, but playing *Seventeen Seconds* (the original Fiction CD release, Polydor 825 354-2, not the later “Deluxe Edition” re-master) takes me straight back to those audio beginnings, except that now the system is delivering exactly what I was always seeking. It's not just a question of weight or the resounding thud from the heavily damped bass drum: it's all about the pitch security and pace of those gently evolving bass lines, the underlying sense of drive and urgency they bring to the tracks, the helter-skelter melody, and latent menace that underpin ‘A Forest’, the restrained insistence of ‘M’. This is bass that isn't just present and correct; it works, integrating seamlessly with the broad mid-band, meshing with and delivering the perfect foundation for the jangling, off-kilter guitars and sardonic vocals.

At least part of the Heeds' success with those Cure albums is down to their ability to capture and recreate the particular atmosphere that characterizes these recordings. In turn that's down to the expansive soundstage and sense of scale their upward firing drivers generate. The sound fills the end of the room. If you are looking for the pinpoint, reach out and touch imaging so beloved of audiophiles and audiophile prose, then look elsewhere. What the Enigma 5s create is a band or orchestra, laid out in an acoustic space behind and around the speakers. Relative positions are clear, the sense of height is (unsurprisingly) exceptional, but this is more the gentle wash of a Whistler than the heightened clarity and sharp brightness of a Canaletto. It's perhaps the

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Ken Kessler, Hi-fi News July 2012  
VTL TL5.5II / ST-150 review



*"The S-200 offers endlessly absorbing, effortless musical enjoyment. Warmly recommended."*

Steve Harris, Hi-fi News July 2014  
VTL S-200 review



► This aspect of the Enigma 5s goes deeper than that. Distance to the back wall is certainly critical to getting the best balance of bass weight, texture, and integration, but beyond that, proximity of furniture and other items as well as the overall size of the space in which they are being used leaves the speakers remarkably unconcerned. This could just be the perfect solution for small, irregular, or difficult rooms or environments, especially given that while it likes power, it doesn't demand it to turn in a remarkably musical performance – just witness the results achieved with the Icon Audio tube integrated and the Arcam FMJ A19, both of which drove the Heeds to satisfying levels without strain or distress on either side. But inject a little bit of energy and impetus into the process – exactly what the NAP300-DR delivers – and the speakers respond with serious enthusiasm.

Of course, the combination of enclosed volume and efficiency (amongst other factors) dictate the limits of bass performance, and the Enigmas are not large loudspeakers. The bass they produce is definitely long on quality and surprising for its depth and integration, but there are still limits to how deep it can reach. Playing *5 Years Of Mue5* from Canadian mix-meister Deadmau5 [Virgin MAU5CDP018] demonstrates the little Heeds' sheer musical gusto but also the fact that they can't reach down to the deepest synth-generated bass tracks, the ones that rattle the ribcage, the listening seat, and any loose fillings. However, put what they do achieve in context of their size and price and there are very few speakers in this category that can better their bottom end. Having said that, delivering that performance depends on getting the speakers upright and firmly planted on their four, corner-mounted spikes – which brings me to my one real criticism of the Enigma 5. The M6 threads for the spikes are rebated so deeply into the speaker's base that they should really supply longer than standard spikes. Getting the speakers solid and the spikes locked off is hard enough. Precise levelling or adjustment of rake angle is really out of the question and I wonder just how much difference that might have made. I tried pretty much everything in my collection and believe me, I've got way more M6 spikes of different types than any one man could (or should) possibly need, but I couldn't find anything long enough to give me a decent range of adjustment as well as height under the speaker to lock the spikes off with real precision. It's the sort of thing that would really bug me normally, but in this case, I was so busy enjoying the results that I almost forgot about it.

At the other end of the spectrum, the extreme high-frequencies are definitely rounded and a little muted by modern standards – not surprising given that you are listening

## HEED ENIGMA 5 TECH PANEL

**Type:** Two-way floorstanding loudspeaker with hybrid reflex/transmission line loading

**Driver Complement:** 25mm Acuflex soft-dome HF, 150mm polymer cone bass/mid

**Sensitivity:** 86dB

**Impedance:** 8 ohms, non-reactive

**Bi-wire Terminals:** Yes

**Finishes:** Black ash and various wood veneers.

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 210 x 270 x 710mm (plus spikes)

**Weight:** 11.0kg ea.

**Price:** From £2,500 per pair

**Manufactured by:** Heed Audio, Hungary

**URL:** [www.heedaudio.com](http://www.heedaudio.com)

**UK Distributor:** RPD Distribution

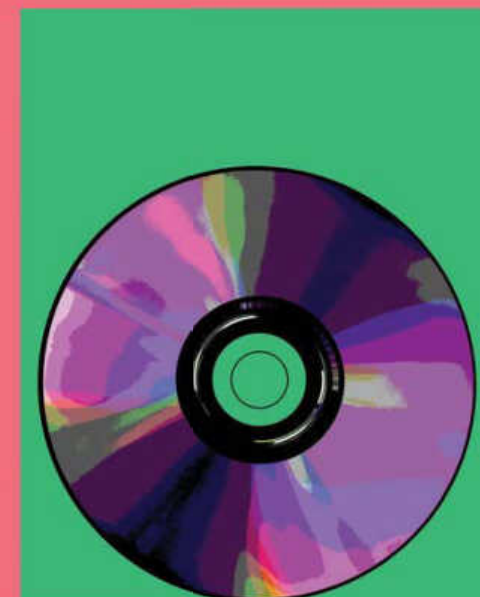
**URL:** [www.heedaudio.co.uk](http://www.heedaudio.co.uk)

**Tel:** +44 (0) 1242 511133

so far off of the tweeter's axis. But that's not the issue you might think. Sure, it costs you a little of the pinpoint imagery and spot-lit transparency whose description occupies so many column inches in reviews, and which apparently holds so much fascination for many audiophiles. But the upside is the contribution this overall balance makes to the Enigma's relaxed sense of easy communication and the remarkable musical coherence it produces. This is a classic case of the whole being greater than the apparent sum of the parts. Like I've said before, this is a speaker that works – not so much in hi-fi terms, but in pure musical engagement and satisfaction.

Omnis are not for everyone and you might argue that a pseudo-omni falls between two stools and won't please anyone. Standing against that proposition you've got the Heed Enigma 5, a compact, unassuming, and visually understated little speaker that seems to break every rule and discard the accepted wisdom that governs current mainstream speaker design. In fact, its one claim to fame rests on its musical performance, a performance that's as unexpected as it is remarkable. This is one of the most downright enjoyable and satisfying speakers I've used, almost irrespective of price. The Enigma 5 puts the music squarely front and centre, with hi-fi niceties running a very distant second. If you listen with your ears rather than your eyes, you could just discover a seriously under-rated gem. +





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- B. Not shy of fireworks dynamics
- C. Reproducing music as a complete, legato, flowing entity

To answer, please visit Ensemble's dedicated competition page at <http://www.ensembleexperience.com/competition>. Alternatively, send your answer on a postcard (including your name, address, and contact details) to "Ensemble AG Competition, P.O. Box 215, CH-4147 Aesch, Switzerland. The competition closes on May 5th 2016.

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## Triangle Elara LN01

by Jason Kennedy

It's strange how perceptions change. Back in the 1990s, Paul Messenger was a big fan of Triangle speakers because they possessed the qualities of pace, rhythm, and timing that he values most highly. At the time I found Triangle speakers forward and bright, albeit not as bright as the speakers he really loved: Rehdekos. This is the second Triangle I have reviewed in recent times and neither of them have sounded all that bright. Some would say that this is because I'm deaf, but I get the impression that the speakers themselves have become smoother through the treble and the sources we use have done the same. It could also be a

case of relative balance; I use PMC Fact.8s as a reference today, and back then I had somewhat more fulsome sounding Bowers & Wilkins 802s.

Triangle still makes loudspeakers in France and many have the distinctive horn loaded tweeter of classic models, but the winds of change are everywhere and the latest range from the brand looks beyond the audiophile fringe. Elara is a small range of beautifully finished speakers at almost budget prices. It's Triangle's most affordable series in the UK and comes in at a price not previously encountered with the brand, despite looks that are designed to turn the heads of the sonically ►







*“The silk dome was chosen for Elara thanks to its forgiving nature, but is not old fashioned.”*

the budget didn't allow for a horn-loaded design. This is a pragmatic change on Triangle's behalf; inexpensive speakers like the Elara are often partnered with low cost amplifiers, and the grainy treble common to many lower-cost amplifiers is frequently highlighted by the fundamental behaviour of a metal dome tweeter. The Elara's silk dome was selected for its forgiving nature under these same conditions, but is not old fashioned by any means, and features neodymium magnets to control the voice coil.

Triangle doesn't say so specifically, but all the indications are that Elara has been designed to suit mainstream formats like MP3 and even the balance of popular products like Beats headphones. In other words, the LN01 has plenty of bass and a smooth treble, so it won't make your iTunes downloads sound as nasty as more purist speakers can do. This seems like a sensible move given the dominance of lossy music formats and the fact that speakers need to do something that headphones can't, which is shake your booty for you.

This could mean a speaker that sounds fat and woolly in a system with a clean source and amplifier, but cleverly Triangle has managed to largely dodge that pitfall. The LN01 does have a more full-bodied balance than most speakers of its size and price, but so long as you keep the Elaras away from walls, bass is by no means congested. I started out by following the instructions supplied, which suggest a position for the speakers that puts them closer to the corner than would usually be the case, causing the output of the rear firing port to thicken the bass and mask detail. However, ignore the manual, pull them a little further into the room, and they start to boogie in a rather entertaining fashion.

In pure audiophile terms the LN01 is short on image depth. It might have helped if I could have placed the listening seat at the prescribed two metres from the speakers, but circumstances and the size of the sofa mean I have to sit about three and a half metres away; a distance where many speakers can deliver decent image depth. Width however is well projected and it was not uncommon for these Triangles to throw sound well out to the side walls. Meanwhile, image height is fine, if not spectacular. In other respects though, the LN01 does a great job; dynamics and timing are both strong, and power handling is very good. This is where the 'high for the size' 89dB sensitivity comes in handy; this speaker is

- ▶ unenlightened. The range consists of two floorstanders, a centre channel, and the LN01 bookshelf you see before you. Triangle also makes two suitably styled subwoofers.

Standing just under 30cm high, the LN01 is attractively devoid of fixings and grille mounts; the former are hidden under trim rings, while the matching colour grilles attach magnetically. This, combined with the smooth face of the main driver, give this speaker a deceptively minimalist appearance. It looks simple, yet the quality of the design suggests its development was far more ambitious than you might expect. The mid/bass driver, for example, has a concave treated paper cone that is devoid of the usual dust cap in an effort to increase rigidity and efficiency. This driver has a conventional coil and magnet motor system that Triangle describes as 'double ferrites'; a common feature in more expensive speakers, but less so at this end of the market.

The tweeter is a new silk dome that while not all that radical for speakers at this price, is quite a departure for Triangle; in the past the company used metal domes when

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*“The LN01s came through with surprising energy and slightly forward crispness.”*

- made to party! It also belies its size which, while small by ‘our’ standards, is bigger than the baked bean cans that most households deem to be sufficient for loudspeaker duties.

I gave these speakers a quick blast with a ‘real world’ amplifier, in the form of a TEAC AI-301DA: a cute DSD DAC equipped integrated with a claimed 60 Watt/4 Ohm output and presumed switching power supply. With analogue signals, it made the Elaras sound a little woolly in the bass but pleasant enough. But digital inputs via USB were very different: the LN01s came through with surprising energy and slightly forward crispness, a balance that would suit situations where listeners were not in the sweet spot. I’m not sure how forgiving it would be with low bit-rate sources, as these can easily tip over into graininess, but there was no shortage of level. So for the casual listener who puts their speakers where it’s convenient it’s a combination that can work well.

With the more sophisticated driving powers of a Rega Brio-R integrated things are a whole lot more appealing to those of us prepared to sit and listen. I kicked off with Bach’s ‘Chaconne’ by Evgeny Kissin [*The Essential Evgeny Kissin*, RCA], where the piano had good dynamics, pace, and flow... but not quite enough of the body of the instrument, which is slightly surprising given the Elara’s enthusiasm for bass. A live rock track by Frank Zappa redressed the balance with surprisingly strong atmosphere and seemingly plenty of bass energy. The more sophisticated ‘The Man I Love’ on *Gershwin’s World* [Herbie Hancock, Verve] pushes this side of things a little too far and results in slightly overblown lows that contrast with Joni Mitchell’s dusky vocals. The latter maintain all their languorous charm and are presented with a degree of stereo solidity that is very appealing: you can easily forgive the lack of definition in the bass. I found that with good recordings like this, the Triangles can be pushed to a decent volume without losing composure. That is because the interplay between musicians remains clear and exact, which equates to great timing, and that is a fundamental with all forms of music.

More challenging oratorio pieces like St Matthew’s Passion prove beyond the LN01s scope. It’s the scale that is hardest to deliver, especially with the dynamics of a full orchestra and choir. I switched to another small and even more affordable speaker (Q-Acoustics 2010i) to see if I was asking too much, and found they, too, struggled. Going back, the

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 2-way, two-driver stand-mount monitor with rear-ported bass reflex enclosure  
**Driver complement:** One 25mm silk dome tweeter, one 135mm concave paper mid-bass driver  
**Frequency response:** 56Hz–22kHz  
**Crossover frequency:** not specified  
**Impedance:** 8 Ohms  
**Sensitivity:** 89dB/W/m  
**Dimensions (H×W×D):** 291 × 165 × 265mm  
**Weight:** 4.5kg/each  
**Finishes:** Piano Black, High-Gloss White  
**Price:** £375

**Manufacturer:** Triangle Electroacoustique  
**Tel:** +33 (0)3 23 75 38 20  
**URL:** [www.triangle-fr.com](http://www.triangle-fr.com)

### UK retailers

**The Music Room**  
**Phone :** 0141 333 9700  
**URL:** [www.music-room.com](http://www.music-room.com)

**Audio Images**  
**Phone :** 01502 582853  
**URL:** [www.audioimages-hifi.com](http://www.audioimages-hifi.com)

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**Phone :** 01432 354921  
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Elaras illustrated that it’s worth upgrading from a £120 because they sounded authoritative, solid, and more sophisticated by comparison. There is more substance in the vocals and they can play louder without struggling. So yes, worth the upgrade. An alternative comparison was with an original DALI Royal Menuet, another smaller speaker, but a more refined and expensive one. While this delivered much improved image depth, it did so at the expense of bass power and timing, both of which were far better with the Triangle.

The Elara LN01 is a beauty of a speaker in its white finish and it has what it needs to keep you listening. The balance won’t suit all tastes or systems, but the forgiving nature of the presentation makes most music sound good; its presentation of tempo in particular is up there with the best in class. +



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# German Physiks Unlimited Mk II loudspeaker (slight return)

by Alan Sircom

**T**owards the middle of 2013, German Physiks delivered a pair of Unlimited Mk II loudspeakers to the *Hi-Fi+* offices. Towards the end of 2015, German Physiks did precisely the same thing, in order to show precisely what had changed in the intervening years. Even though the Unlimited Mk II is a child of the 2010s, German Physiks was prepared to revise one of its most successful designs, but while many brands would be content to call these changes an entirely new version, German Physiks is satisfied with quietly making a better product.

Let's loop back 31 issues and discuss the Unlimited Mk II itself. Born out of the 2010 'Limited II' (a 100-pair limited run designed to show what the company can do with a lower than usual price tag). The Limited II proved extremely popular, with all 100 selling out fast, so the Unlimited Mk II followed in its wake. A tall, slender, omnidirectional floorstander, like many others in the German Physiks line, the key cost saving exercise in the Unlimited Mk II was making a four-sided enclosure instead of the octagonal cabinet of the next in line HRS-130.

The Unlimited II features the company's own Dicks Dipole Driver, or 'DDD'; a carbon fibre driver with a true 360° horizontal dispersion. Based around a late 1970s concept by German engineer Peter Dicks (hence the name), the DDD concept works with the inherent properties of drive units, rather than treating these functions as limitations. A cone will work pistonically at low frequencies, but will shift to bending wave mode and finally fully modal radiation properties as the frequency rises. Rather than try to find 'work arounds' to overcome these intrinsic aspects of a loudspeaker, Dicks proposed designing a loudspeaker that utilised these inherent functions of a drive unit, effectively producing a near full-range four-way loudspeaker in one cone.

Those with extremely long memories might also recall the Ohm loudspeaker system, which featured a similar driver designed by the late Lincoln Walsh. This 'bending wave transducer' design had the same basic conical section (beautifully described by Dick Olsher in our sister title *The Absolute Sound* as looking, "like a giant inverted ice cream cone"). The pulsating drive unit was ahead of its time, and way ahead of the materials science of the early 1960s. Fast forward almost 20 years and cone materials like lightweight titanium allowed the bending wave transducer to come of age, and subsequent developments in carbon-fibre meant the DDD unit improved still further.

The resultant design looks unlike most loudspeakers, with a top pod containing the driver's magnet, voice coil and spider, with the cone itself facing down into the top of the main enclosure (the 'giant inverted ice cream cone' coined by Olsher). There isn't a loudspeaker basket as such, just a series of

*"beautifully described by Dick Olsher in our sister title The Absolute Sound as looking like a giant inverted ice cream cone."*





chrome plated rods to support the top of the drive unit. A more conventional carbon-fibre 200mm down-firing unit sits at the bottom of the cabinet, providing bottom-end reinforcement.

So far, the Unlimited Mk II remains exactly the same as before. There are several new high gloss finishes (called the Ultimate Unlimited, which includes the gloss black model we tested), and an all carbon-fibre finish called the Unlimited Carbon, which is mostly aimed at Asian markets. The sound is identical to standard Unlimited Mk IIs, but the difference between the acoustic vinyl and black high gloss polyester finish is £2,000; although this is fairly steep given the base price is £8,900, I think the high gloss look is a significant and justifiable improvement over the basic grey, black, white, or brown vinyl.

The big change between the Ultimate Mk II reviewed in issue 102 and the one reviewed in this issue is not simply the high gloss look. The crossover has gone in for a radical redesign, or rather several redesigns over time. This has addressed some of the compatibility issues that made the loudspeaker a bit sensitive in amp choice at its last visit. When last I tested the Ultimate Mk II, I suggested the loudspeaker required current to drive it. That still holds, but it's less demanding, allowing more valve amplification to come into the mix without a concomitant dip in the high treble as a result. This also has an advantage in sonic terms, even when ideally partnered. ▶



► It's slightly difficult in writing this review because we are inevitably going over old ground. I urge prospective German Physiks customers to check out both my previous review of the Ultimate Mk II and Dick Olsher's review of the same at *The Absolute Sound* for the full introduction to the unique properties of the omnidirectional speaker, but the Cliff Notes version of the same is the loudspeaker creates an extremely musical experience, more like you are in the concert hall than the control room of a studio. They work best in a large room because of their omnidirectional nature, but they are far less troubled by the demands of room treatment and don't require micron-tolerance positioning of speaker or listener to deliver the goods. This perhaps works at its best with orchestral music and at its worst with a close mic'd, right-between-the-speakers, girl-with-guitar style recording (where the omnidirectional nature of the speaker makes such recordings appear a little diffuse), but those who 'get' what this kind of speaker can do will either be self-editorial in their music buying or accommodate such limitations.

Comparing the listening notes between old and new, however, this last point now seems a lot better resolved. The sound of Kat Edmonson singing 'Lucky' [*Way Down Low*, Spinnerette] wasn't as rounded and diffused, and there was still that sense of a singer in the listening room; more like a real person's voice as it bounces round the room rather than a disembodied vocal 'thing' floating between the loudspeakers. Even replaying the a cappella version of 'Tom's Diner' by Suzanne Vega once more [*Solitude Standing*, A&M] showed this to be less diffuse and more focussed. You could always understand the vocals and the meaning behind them, but the German Physiks presentation perhaps lost a little in the hi-fi sense of a musical 'hologram' – the revisions help both the naturalistic reproduction and the audiophile-friendly sense of dimensionality.

Moving to the loudspeaker's true calling – orchestral music – this improved imagery came over as a more cogent orchestra in a larger environment. Once again rolling out the Saint Saens *Symphony No 3* [Munch/Boston SO, Living Stereo] the sense of the musical performance the previous Ultimate Mk II delivered was enhanced by an increased sense of spaciousness in the imaging, a deeper bass, and more detail especially in the upper registers. This was not necessarily a night-and-day change in performance, but those who auditioned a pair of German Physiks a few years ago and wished for a bit more heft at the bottom end and more definition at the top, just got their wishes granted.

The big question perhaps is should existing Unlimited Mk II listeners with the older crossover feel short-changed? No. The Unlimited Mk II is a good loudspeaker, whether it has the old or new crossover. Moreover, if you chose an Unlimited Mk II and picked out a good amplifier partner, a lot of what the change to the crossover actually does is academic; the revised crossover brings more amplifiers to the party, but if you already made that choice and made it well, the new crossover's benefits in greater compatibility are not really needed. The new crossover brings a little more clarity and quite a lot more bass, but the change is more a subtle development than a radical shift in performance. I have a feeling that those who like the German Physiks sound are fans for life, and if you already have a Limited II or an Unlimited Mk II, the better option would be to consider a full-on upgrade further up the German Physiks ladder, maybe to the HRS-130 or even to the Borderland Mk IV.

Back in issue 102, I concluded that everyone should take a listen to the Unlimited Mk II because if you like what it does, most conventional loudspeakers sound contrived. I still hold to that, but in the intervening period, the loudspeaker has become more physically attractive and more universally acceptable. More than ever, you owe it to yourself to try the German Physiks sound. It could be all you ever need. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

### Operating Principle:

two-way loudspeaker with  
360° surround radiation

**Frequency Response:** 32Hz–24kHz

**Sensitivity:** 88dB/W/m

**Impedance:** Four Ohms

**Power Handling (Nominal/Maximum):**

110W/170W

**Amplification required:**

Minimum 90W/4ohms

**Crossover frequency:** 200Hz

**Crossover slopes:**

DDD Section: 6dB/octave  
(electronic),

18dB/octave (acoustic)

**Woofer Section:** 18dB/octave

(electronic & acoustic)

**Input connectors:** 1x binding posts

**Drivers:** 1x carbon-fibre DDD driver,  
1x 200mm woofer

**Finish:** satin white, black, light grey  
or dark brown vinyl as standard,  
black, white, red, or yellow high  
gloss polyester finish in Ultimate  
form, as tested

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 24x105x24cm

**Weight:** 28.9kg

**Price:** As tested £10,900 per pair

**Manufactured by:** German Physiks

**URL:** [www.german-physiks.com](http://www.german-physiks.com)

**Email:** [info@german-physiks.com](mailto:info@german-physiks.com)

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# DALI Epicon 8 floorstanding loudspeaker

by Jason Kennedy

**T**here aren't very many loudspeaker companies that do in-depth research and build their own drive units in this business. DALI is a rare exception, and one that has been making some impressive technological breakthroughs in recent times. The Epicon series is DALI's flagship range, comprising two floorstanders, a bookshelf, and a centre channel for home cinema systems. They have fabulous finishes, distinctive woodpulp cones with a maroon colouring, and all but the bookshelf has a ribbon tweeter.

The Epicon 8 is the daddy. It's a 'three and a half and a half way', in that it's a conventional three-and-a-half way loudspeaker with the ribbon tweeter counting as an extra half way in its own right. The suffix 8 springs from its use of eight inch (200mm) bass drivers that, alongside the 165mm midrange, benefit from DALI's analysis of loudspeaker magnet systems. This research identified that eddy currents induced in a conductor by variations in the magnetic field cause breaks in power to the motor system. DALI's engineers found that they could reduce the effect of these eddy currents by using pulverised rather than solid iron ferrite for the edge of the gap where the voice coil sits, where its lower electrical conductivity is most beneficial.

This soft magnetic compound (SMC) also displays lower lag time between magnetisation, induced by the voice coil, and demagnetisation. It doesn't make for a more efficient drive unit in sensitivity terms, but does produce less heat and results in lower distortion. SMC was originally developed for diesel rail injectors, but being first out of the gate, DALI has patented the technology's use in the hi-fi universe.

The drivers themselves are made from doped wood pulp which is essentially a slightly coarser version of paper, it was selected because the lower uniformity of the material avoids high Q resonances. These are bonded to soft rubber surrounds with carefully selected glues, the softer rubber chosen because it delivers better low level sound quality. This does not, I'm told, make for lower longevity as has been the case with softer surrounds in the past.

High frequencies are produced by a 29mm soft dome that hands over to a ribbon tweeter at 15kHz, making the latter effectively a supertweeter. The ribbon is specified to 30kHz, but has a relatively low output and good horizontal

dispersion. This may be why DALI recommends that its speakers be positioned without toe-in.

DALI does not make any special claims about the Epicon 8 cabinet save that it's constructed from a laminate of MDF sheets. These allow its sides to be sculpted into an inherently stiff curved shape, and the multiple layers of glue give it a degree of a self damping. DALI does mention that there are ten layers of lacquer, which produces a finish that's remarkable even by the high standard of speakers at this price.

The cabinet has a two small reflex ports on the rear and a detachable base that accepts some very nicely machined, black chrome plated spikes with a chunky M10 thread. Alternatively, there's a set of rubber feet that will be less useful in hand-to-hand combat. Bi-wire terminals can be linked with a suitably shiny bridging plate, but for best results use jumpers made out of your speaker cable if not bi-wiring. Sensitivity is quoted at 89dB for a five Ohm nominal impedance, an odd figure, but a realistic indication of impedance across the range: like most DALIs, the Epicon 8 is an easy load.

DALI is also into music, which is not to say that other speaker manufacturers aren't, but DALI makes this clear by producing compilation albums that contain tracks that are not by obscure artists and selected purely for sound quality. Instead the company finds great sounding pieces of music and goes through the not inconsiderable rigmarole of obtaining permissions, mastering, and pressing up CDs. The latest example is *Volume 4: The Art of Sound* and contains 15 tracks including songs by Eva Cassidy, Laurie Anderson, Infected Mushroom, Jacques Loussier, and James Blood Ulmer. It was the latter's 'Crying' [*Live at the Bayerischer Hof*, In+Out Records] that DALI used to impress me after these speakers were man-handled out of their boxes and hauled into place in the listening room. And it was easy to hear why they chose it; the kick drum on this track is awesome – as powerful, deep and substantial as any I have heard – and big bass drivers are hard to beat with this sort of source material. As the Epicon 8 has two of them, the effect is rather entertaining.

The Epicon 8 has a generous bottom end. It's not overblown or thick despite a rear firing port, but warm and rich with the ability to deliver oodles of timbre where the instruments and voices warrant it. This is also an uncannily smooth and clean speaker. Its presentation is as luxurious as



its finish, but this luxuriant sound is not because of something the speaker does, but due to something it does not do – as if a form of distortion we were hitherto unaware of has been eliminated. This is not as daft as it sounds; some types of distortion are so ubiquitous that we take them for granted, but when they go away it's instantly obvious that they are one of the many additions that audio systems make to the sound. A high fidelity component should have as little effect as possible on the signal it reproduces, but inevitably this is a goal that is essentially impossible to attain: you only have to consider what effect a piece of wire can have on sound to understand. So the aim of audio hardware should be to add as little as possible, and with SMC alongside the other refinements in the Epicon 8, DALI has made a big step in that direction. The benefit of this is an ease and resolution that is rare even in speakers at this price; it's revealing in an effortless fashion, which makes for a very addictive listening experience.

The Epicon 8 pulls details out of recordings like rabbits out of a hat, and things that you didn't know were there become apparent. Laurie Anderson's 'The Dream Before' [*Strange Angels*, Warner Bros] has some quietly spoken words on it where some of the sibilants disappear; here they are back, still quiet of course, but present. This attention to detail benefits pretty much everything you play, bringing out notes, tone colour, and image shape with equal ease. I particularly enjoyed the sound of the voices and guitars on Dave Rawlings' 'Machine' (*Nashville Obsolete*, Acony), a recent release where it's clear that they have gone to some lengths to get a decent sound. This extends to the image depth as well, which is better than I had realised, and serves to make the gorgeous balladeering on the album all the more poignant. It makes me want to play some Gillian Welch albums (pretty much the same band), which aren't in the same sonic league, but the stronger songwriting makes up for a lot.

You don't have to play great recordings to enjoy this speaker; just play great music and you'll soon be having fun. I plucked Frank Zappa's 'Magic Fingers' [*You Can't Do That On Stage Anymore, Vol.6*, Zappa Records] – not the original Flo and Eddie version, but a later one with Ray White (or possibly Ike Willis) on vocals. The sound on this is good for a live concert of its era (1980) but the performance is stunning, and the DALIs let you know this without trying. This track ►



*“The speaker does the important job of bringing the concert alive in your living room with panache.”*

- features another powerful kick drum (the Epicon 8 seems to like them) as well as some fine high tempo playing from one of Zappa's many well-honed ensembles. This speaker does the important job of bringing the concert alive in your living room with panache. It has the ability to produce decent SPLs, yet remains calm and composed, which is more than can be said of this particular audience when things got going.

When the recording is stronger, the levels of realism go up in proportion. This was achieved with Janine Jansen's Prokofiev [Decca]; the violin playing totally escapes the cabinets and takes its place in the room with absolute conviction. The effect is enhanced when the basses join in thanks to the scale that they add, but it's the purity of the mid and treble that makes the lead instrument so convincing. Few speakers can render the softness that a violin is capable of because most introduce at least a *souppçon* of grain: the Epicon 8 is extremely refined in this regard and thus leaves very little imprint on the end result.

This degree of transparency inevitably means the Epicon 8 is a slave to whatever goes before it. Most of the listening was done with a Naim NAP 250 DR power amp, Townshend Allegri pre, and the Leema Libra DAC with Melco N1-A source over USB. This system clearly suited the DALIs, but out of interest I also tried Marantz's relatively affordable but highly capable PM14 S1 SE integrated amplifier. This brought more richness and warmth to the presentation albeit at the cost of less gripping timing, the Naim's speciality. Adding the matching SA14 S1 SE CD player/DAC produced a more muscular and pacey sound, one that suits funk/jazz classics like Conjure's *Music For The Texts Of Ishmael Reed* [American Clavé]. Here the bass was juicy and 'phat', the instruments really well separated, and the detail resolution impressive. It's not the sweetest of recordings, but this system proved that neither does it have any inherent glare. Again, tone is king; in this case it's the electric guitar that stands proud, proving that treble can have body that equals the rest of the range.

Going back to the Townshend/Naim pairing, I also tried the CAD CAT transport and 1543 MkII DAC as a front end, which readers of issue 132 may recall is a pretty special digital source. It's also a sound that perfectly matches the DALIs' finesse and detail retrieval, so the system created a truly 'reach out and touch', super deluxe sound. A close

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 3.5 + 0.5-way, five-driver, floorstanding speaker with reflex loaded enclosure

**Driver complement:** One 10mm x 55mm ribbon, one 29mm soft dome tweeter with 34mm surround; one 165mm midrange driver; two 200mm bass drivers with doped wood pulp cones

**Crossover frequencies:** 550Hz, 3,100Hz, 15kHz

**Frequency response:** 35Hz–30kHz (+/- 3dB)

**Impedance:** 5 Ohms

**Sensitivity:** 89dB/W/m

**Dimensions (HxWxD):** 1225 x 264 x 485mm

**Weight:** 47.5kg/each

**Finishes:** ruby macassar, black, walnut

**Price:** £11,499/pair

**Manufacturer:** Dali A/S

**Tel:** +45 96 72 11 55

**URL:** [www.dali-speakers.com](http://www.dali-speakers.com)


**Distributed in the UK by:** DALI UK

**Tel (UK only):** 0845 644 3537

miked piece by Sarabeth Tucek [*Get Well Soon*, Echo], where the recording level is clearly on the hot side, is nonetheless capable of raising the hairs on your neck when delivered with the degree of transparency presented by the Epicon 8. You can hear the effects that have been used in the studio, but there is nonetheless a ghostly presence to this performance that perhaps relates to the subject matter; the death of the artist's father.

The DALI Epicon 8 is a remarkable loudspeaker. Its warmth comes from the absence of grain across the board, and the capabilities of two decent size bass drivers. The fact that it worked in a narrow room proves that although the bass can be fulsome, it is also perfectly controlled. The mid and top ice the cake with a relaxed transparency that anyone will enjoy if they have a source and amplification that is at least clean. I really like the way that there is so little sense of strain; in this respect the Epicon 8 is easily on a par with the best at the price. DALI may not have the sort of boutique brand profile of the most revered speakers in high-end audio, but the company's scale means that it can produce a genuinely high-end speaker at a far more sensible price than smaller operations. The Epicon 8 is a winner, no doubt about it. +





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**Robert Deutsch – Stereophile Feb 2015**





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# Naim Mu-so Qb system

by Alan Sircom

**T**he Mu-so Qb was the audio buzz of CES, and not in the wrong way. Although many 'specialty audio' rooms at the show were frighteningly empty at times, Naim Audio's room was not one of them - there was a steady through-flow of visitors looking specifically at the new Mu-so Qb. Following in the footsteps of the Mu-so, this new, small, cube of sound is designed to reach a new set of music lovers.

In a way, this new device has the toughest job to do of all the products in the Naim line. On the one hand, it has to stand alone, inviting new listeners

to join the club. On the other hand, it has to be exciting enough to entice existing Naim users to add more rooms to the mix. On the, er, third hand, it needs to be the perfect introduction for people who want something a bit better than a Sonos Play (which is harder than it seems, it's a very good package at the price), and on the fourth hand it needs to do all that while being simple enough for almost ▶





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The original Mu-so works in part because it combines the elements that make good traditional audio in a more modern aspect: it's basically amps and speakers in a wooden cabinet. The size and complexity of the Mu-so Qb shape (it looks like an Olmec stone head under the grille) meant wood was out of the question at the price, so the cabinet is made from a tough glass-filled polymer. From the front there are two angled tweeters, two slightly less angled midrange units, one 'racetrack' bass unit, and two well-made passive radiators firing out to the sides. Independent 50W amplifiers drive both the tweeters and midrange drivers, while a single 100W device powers the bass. Naim could have gone for exotic DSP to create more of a stereophonic sound, but instead the company went for a less processed sound with a 'slightly-stereo' presentation. It uses the same 32-bit digital processing as the Mu-so, however.

Mu-so Qb's rear panel is a heatsink for the amplifier and digital audio circuitry, and it gives the device some weight, solidity, and surprising tactile advantages - you can't help putting your hand reassuringly on the heatsink when first installing it. Like its bigger brother, the Qb sits on an acrylic sheet that has three levels of illumination and a white Naim logo, and the top plate is given over to that super cool touch multiway controller/volume control dial.

The device is ludicrously easy to install, with one notable caveat. Take it out the box,

power it up, and play. That's it! OK, so you need a device to control the Mu-so Qb, and that means an iOS or Android phone or tablet, and Naim's own app. Nevertheless, once you installed the Naim app, the process needed to add a new Mu-so is unfeasibly 'light-switch' easy. The caveat is there is no display as such on the Mu-so Qb, just different coloured lights in set-up: if you live in a place of massively contended wireless internet, there's no obvious way to make sure your Mu-so Qb has glommed onto the right wireless router. In most cases, it will take you longer to take the Qb out of its box than it will to get it up and running.

There are a range of options, including display brightness, loudness, two alarm functions (it makes one hell of a clock radio), and the optimum installation configurator (as in, 'is it less than or more than 25cm from the wall!'). You can even get different colour moulded grilles for the Qb, and 'skin' your app to match.

Mu-so Qb - and for that matter, the original Mu-so - can play digital sources (wired through USB or optical digital, or wireless through AirPlay and Bluetooth), or stream digital audio through wired or Wi-Fi ethernet, whether local UPnP network streaming or from online streaming sources. The box comes with a voucher for a month's free Spotify Premium, and there's also a 90-day Tidal trial (both are fully integrated into Mu-so Qb's system). There is also a vTuner Internet radio service, and even a 3.5mm analogue input jack. Multiroom use is entirely possible (although currently there is no planned provision for turning the Qb into a master-slave stereo pair in one room) and just as easy to operate and install as that first Mu-so.

Technologically, then, Naim Audio's Mu-so Qb ticks all the boxes. But does it sound any good? In a nutshell, it sounds a lot better than you might expect. It does very well with voices: a day into using the Qb it became a part of the morning ritual, playing *The Today Programme* from BBC Radio 4's HD internet radio channel around the room at a 'shake out the sleep dust' level. And when it comes to music it's similarly fun, projecting a good sound around the listening room.

OK, let's be totally honest here, this is no high-end performer and in absolute terms there are a few undernourished strings when hearing the sound of open guitar chords, the sound is slightly boxy and where the Mu-so was bass-heavy, if anything this errs on the side of upper bass warmth and not much else. But this is coming straight after a system where one single power cord cost almost 23x as much as the Mu-so, and the loudspeakers have about eight times the cabinet volume.





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*“The Naim Mu-so Qb sounds just so much better than a lot of what passes for sound from some of these units, it’s laughable.”*

popular boxes, but the Las Vegas connection fits, because it deals with them ol’ school: It pulverises them, drives them out into the desert, and buries them in a shallow grave. The Naim Mu-so Qb sounds just so much better than a lot of what passes for sound from some of these units, it’s laughable. There will be some people who, in all innocence, spanked down a few hundred pounds on some well-respected equipment in this class that sounds actually pretty good... until they hear what the Qb can do. Then those few hundred pounds were wasted money.

What you get here is musical diversity. At one point, you’ll argue the toss over the difference in performance between Spotify and Tidal (but you can hear a difference, and between MP3, CD, and – if you wire it into a network – 24/192 high-res) but it really doesn’t matter, because you’ll just soak up music in all its guises and love doing so. You’ll surf through your own networked music, you’ll plough through online, you’ll spend hours just listening to Radio Paradise, and more.

I’ve not logged as many hours with the Mu-so as I have with the Mu-so Qb, but in a way, the Qb is perhaps the more audio-enthusiast ready product; the Mu-so is a great gateway for people who aren’t audiophiles to gain new insight into the sound music can make, but it does have a bit of a boomy bass by hi-fi buff standards. That boom and bloom are significantly decreased in the Mu-so Qb, and yet, it doesn’t sound particularly bass light. I can see Mu-so Qb’s springing up around the house of someone with a dedicated Naim networked music system in the listening room, and I can see that happening more with the Qb than with the original Mu-so – not because of the higher price of the Mu-so, but because the Qb is more like a teeny-tiny Naim system than the larger Mu-so. Some are already doing this, combining the big Naim system in the main room with devices like Sonos Play:3 and Play:5 speakers in secondary rooms. The Mu-so Qb is the perfect upgrade in such homes, and I’d wager that most of those homes will be almost entirely Sonos-free in fairly short order.

Here’s why. My classical-loving father-in-law has just discovered jazz and has started asking me questions about the subject. Rather than drag him into the listening room and play him a handful of tracks in which he expressed interest, I played him a quick burst of Art Tatum, followed by some Oscar Peterson, and then on to Herbie Hancock (he’s very into piano, too), played quick, dirty, and fairly loud in seconds, all from the kitchen. Were I to have done that on something less than competent, he’s the kind of listener who would be more focused on the minutiae than the way the three players ‘flow’. Were it not capable of being played loud, those 70+ years of concert going would mean Tatum especially would disappear beneath the background noise of tinnitus. Instead, he revelled in his burgeoning jazznological knowledge in spotting how Art Tatum was extending out ragtime, how Peterson chilled it out, and then how Hancock re-inserted the groove.

► This is the fairly typical ass-backwards way we audiophiles have of looking at stuff. Compare it to the best possible and forget about context. Coming back down to earth then, and looking at the Qb for what it does, where it does it, and the price it does it for, the ‘Qb’ in Mu-so Qb clearly stands for ‘Quite brilliant’. It’s music stripped down of all that pretentious nonsense that good audio can sometimes add, and it’s got that intrinsic fun factor that a good clock radio has, only a lot, lot bigger sounding. Whether it’s the effortlessness of the set-up, that it looks pretty damn good, the fact it doesn’t overdrive the room, the sheer clean-ness of the overall sound, or just the fact everything works together in a package that’s about the size of a teapot doesn’t ultimately matter.

It’s all about context here, and there are some very big hitters aggressively priced below the Mu-so Qb that the Naim box has to address head-on if it is to succeed. And it does succeed. Masterfully so, in fact: it projects sound into the room well, perfectly filling the sort of small to medium sized rooms in which you’ll most likely find a box like the Qb. We don’t want to mention some of these brands by name as they have really big legal teams that could tie us in knots for months on end, but if you’re considering one of those extremely well-advertised, very



*“It doesn’t crap out at high levels or sound phasey at low levels. And, most importantly, it doesn’t need to apologise for itself sonically.”*

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** integrated streaming system

**Inputs:** UPnP,™ AirPlay, Spotify and Internet Radio via wired Ethernet or Wi-Fi, Bluetooth (with aptX) USB/iOS (USB Type-A socket), Optical S/PDIF (TosLink) up to 96kHz. Analogue: 3.5mm jack

**Audio formats:** WAV, FLAC and AIFF up to 24bit/192kHz, ALAC (Apple Lossless) up to 24bit/96kHz, MP3 up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16 bit), AAC up to 48kHz, 320kbit (16bit), OGG and WMA up to 48kHz (16bit), Bluetooth SBC, AAC and aptX (Note: All formats to 48kHz maximum over wireless network)

**Internet radio:** vTuner premium

**Connectivity:** Ethernet (10/100Mbps) Wi-Fi (802.11b/g) Bluetooth, RC5 remote-control

**Speaker system:** Dual, three-way

**Amplification:** 6 x 75 Watts into 8 Ohms

**Finish:** Brushed aluminium casework, silver anodised heatsink, black fabric grille. Grille options in Deep Blue, Vibrant Red, Burnt Orange

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 12.2x62.8x25.6cm

**Weight:** 13kg

**Price:** £595

**Manufactured by:** Naim Audio

**URL:** [www.naimaudio.com/mu-so-qb](http://www.naimaudio.com/mu-so-qb)

**Tel:** +44 (0)333 321 9923

► Here’s why, part II. I spent some time listening to BBC Six Music and Spotify discovering new sounds that I would not normally do through ‘the stereo’ but instead would normally find from the desktop of my computer. This made those discovery moments so much richer, in part because I was trying to distract myself while chopping vegetables, but also in part because it made me want to find those albums and play them through the main system.

I even get the reasons why Naim went with ‘slightly-stereo’ instead of heroic amounts of DSP. It sounds better. You listen longer. You play louder (remember this when you install one in your kid’s bedroom; the days of them quietly nodding away in the corner to their headphones might quickly end with a Qb in their room, and you’ll reconnect with parents from the 1950s-1990s who had to shout ‘turn it down or else!’ threateningly at a closed door). It doesn’t crap out at high volumes or sound phasey at low levels. And most importantly, it doesn’t need to apologise for itself sonically thanks to the design. I don’t think that’s unique to not using DSP.

Ultimately, I’m not surprised Mu-so Qb was one of the big hits of CES – it puts a smile on your face! In truth, I’ve possibly spent more time just listening to sounds through the Mu-so Qb than I have any high-end audio device I’ve had in the last two years, because it’s just so damn fun and easy to operate. Basically, the only downtime was when my iPad needed a charge. This gets to the absolute core of what music is all about, without costing a fortune! Very highly recommended! +



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# Kuzma 4POINT 14 tonearm

by Roy Gregory

**W**hile many UK audiophiles are still struggling to come to terms with the notion of 12" tonearms that resolutely refuse to mount on their LP12s, those driving this particular arms race are already moving on to bigger and (they assume) better things, with arms as long as 16" becoming if not common, then far from the unusual sights they once were. It's a situation that makes Kuzma's

innovative, musically remarkable, and thoughtfully engineered 4POINT, with its 11" effective length, look almost conservative. Combining easy, repeatable adjustability of all geometric parameters with the sort of physical integrity and rigidity more normally associated with Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the 4POINT's relatively modest 280mm effective length is coupled to an offset pillar that allows it to use the same mounting geometry as a standard 9" arm. This incredibly sensible arrangement keeps the effective mass manageable, even if the arm's total mass is on the high side. It also contributes to a performance whose balance of virtues exceeds not just the other Kuzma arms (a range that includes both 12" and linear-tracking designs) but most other tonearms to boot, making the 4POINT a genuine benchmark product. ▶





*“The 4POINT 14 might just be the best arm out there, and in a world where arms can now cost close to £30,000, it represents great value.”*

► Given the high regard in which the design is held, together with the dogma that afflicts so many audiophile buying decisions) I’ve been half expecting a 12” version of the 4POINT for some time: what I wasn’t expecting was a 14” version! For what is already a physically big arm, adding another three inches to the arm-tube – along with the larger counterweight to match – creates an absolute monster. Effective length is now 353mm: effective mass rises to 19g, making this the preserve of truly low compliance cartridges only (despite differential horizontal and vertical damping) and overall weight is now 2150g. The good news is that mounting geometry is now 291mm, equivalent to many 12” arms, so as long as your turntable will take a foot-long tonearm, the 4POINT 14 should fit. Best of all, at £6,250 the 4POINT 14 might just be the best arm out there, and in a world where arms can now cost close to £30,000, it represents great value. But, is more necessarily better or, when it comes to tonearms, is it possible to have altogether too much of a good thing?

As I’ve already noted, the 291mm mounting distance means that the 4POINT 14 should mount on any deck that will take a standard 12” arm. Having said that, the offset mounting means that the arm’s bearing housing itself and in particular, its extremely long counterweight stub, extend well beyond most armboards/towers, so you need to make sure you’ll have enough room to accommodate the beast, not only when parked but when it swings into action. I used a pre-cut arm block to mount the arm on the Kuzma Stabi M – in place of a standard 4POINT – and getting the arm under the ‘table’s lid was a considerable challenge. Even so, I could only run it with the lid open, although the security offered

while the arm was parked was still extremely welcome. The use of the pre-cut mounting saved me from the second practical challenge. Kuzma mounts look like standard Linn pattern six-bolt cutouts: they aren’t. The Kuzma mounting collars have larger diameter extensions (a full 40mm) than the Linn ones, so you’ll need to get a board cut specifically – a standard Linn mount won’t work, even if the geometry is correct. Once you’ve got the mount in place, you still need to set the pivot to spindle distance, which at 342mm exceeds the beam length of tools like the SMARTractor (although I have a special, longer beam on order). That makes setting the pivot point somewhat hit and miss, and also means that you are limited to using Kuzma’s own two-point protractor. Nothing wrong with that, unless of course you want to use something like UNldin geometry as opposed to the Kuzma’s Lofgren A. Finally, we come back to the question of effective mass. Don’t assume that just because your cartridge is happy in the standard 4POINT, it will be equally at home in the 14. The Lyra Dorian, which is perfectly happy in the standard 4POINT proved marginal, helped by its own low mass, when installed in the 14 for comparison purposes. Even the Fuuga, with its stated compliance of 7cu (at 100hz) generates a fundamental resonance around a low but acceptable 9Hz. You have been warned... Fortunately, the 4POINT 14’s incredibly adaptable damping will solve many problems, but it’s another thing you may find yourself having to deal with. Ohh... and don’t go thinking that you can simply lift a cartridge and headshell out of the 11” arm (assuming that you’re lucky enough to own one) and drop it into the 14”: the headshells might look identical and they certainly fix in the same elegant manner, but the off-set angle is different (19.5° as opposed to 15.35° for the longer arm).

Given the stellar, standard-setting performance of the 11” 4POINT, is the 14” version worth the bother? In the right system and given the right cartridge, the answer to that is definitely a yes. First listen was with the Dorian and I was totally unprepared for the sheer substance, power, energy, and drive generated by the longer arm, even with this accomplished but fairly modest cartridge (less than £500, remember). Adding just a touch of vertical damping brought extra stability, security and transparency to the picture, reinforcing just how critical arm and cartridge matching can be, but swapping between the standard 4POINT and the longer arm with Dorian’s in both simply served to underline the extra presence and musical authority produced by the 14. It was already hinting at greatness before I mounted the Fuuga, but that’s when things got really interesting. The Dorian serves as a perfect all-rounder for back-to-back comparisons between arms or turntables, but a product with the stature and ambition invested in the 4POINT 14 deserves something considerably better – which is exactly where the Fuuga comes in.

In many ways, tonearms work at a significant disadvantage. Their contribution is entirely passive and in a very real sense, they exist only to serve: ►

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► in this case allowing the cartridge to do its job. Bearing in mind just how crude the actual mechanics of dragging a rock along a trench really are, helping the cartridge to be the best that it can be is a considerable challenge. Yet, the more you listen to the 4POINT 14 the clearer it becomes that this is exactly what it achieves. Just as the Dorian generates a shocking degree of musical authority, with bandwidth, dynamic range, and substance that go way beyond the pick-up's asking price, the Fuuga (a cartridge that already excels in those regards) brings a presence and substance to musical performances that really set them apart: apart from the norm – but more crucially, apart from the process of reproduction and the system itself. Install the 4POINT 14 and it brings with it a sense of unfettered dynamic range, limitless energy, absolute stability, and total musical integrity, allowing the performers and the performance to be completely separate from the system. Sound is no longer projected from the speakers, but rather takes on its own, completely independent existence within the room. Just as the 14 removed the dynamic and bandwidth limitations I'd always attributed to the Dorian, allowing that cartridge to grow and project, so it gave the Fuuga (and the Etna) an expressive and spatial freedom that was so free of system limitations that it moved the resulting performance much closer to the live event and the experience of the real. In the simplest possible terms, each of the cartridges used sounded like a bigger, better version of itself, with the result that they communicated more

directly, making your brain's interpretive function considerably simpler: as a result, you heard less system and a lot more music.

It would be very easy to get reductionist about this: it's the reduced tracing error; it's the increase in effective mass; maybe it's all to do with the reduced offset or the almost 30% increase in the fineness of VTA adjustment. I really don't think that it's that simple. Instead, all of these factors (and a few others besides) are working in unison to elevate the tonearm's performance and eliminate it as a limiting factor. The result is an arm that has the musical ease, flow, spatial security, and expressive temporal integrity of arms like the FR66fx or Dynavector DV505 – tonearms rightly lauded for their natural, communicative qualities – combined with the power, precision, and focus of the standard 4POINT. Throw in the 14's party piece – seemingly limitless quantities of sheer musical energy and utterly unimpeded dynamic response, and this is one seriously impressive performer. Put a 4POINT 14 in your system and sit back as your speakers apparently expand in size (at the same time as they disappear), your cartridge grows in power, and the musicians on your records don't just wake up, they decide that today is the day. "Emphatic musical delivery" doesn't even start to cover it. The power and sense of purposeful momentum are what you'll notice first, but after that comes the realization that you've also gained subtlety, intimacy, immediacy and poise. There's a more apparent range of tonal colours in play and a rhythmic fluidity that is as unforced as it is seductively involving.

The 4POINT 14 isn't an arm for everyman: not because everyman won't appreciate its qualities, but because not everyone can accommodate it. It's demanding of space and it works best with exactly the sort of big, heavy, low compliance cartridges that attract big, heavy price tags. The Fuuga is a natural partner, as are Kuzma's own excellent CAR pick-ups. I'd love to hear this arm with one of the platinum magnet Koetsus and the rejuvenated Kisekis beckon also. But if you have the space to mount the arm and the cartridge to partner it, then what the 4POINT 14 delivers is all of the practical benefits ►





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## Four points about the 4POINT

One of things that set the 4POINT arms (both the standard and 14" versions) apart from the competition is the way in which they manage to combine adjustability of all geometrical parameters with a rigidity that at least matches and probably exceeds all even remotely flexible alternatives. Typical gimballed arms, like SMEs or Linn tonearms, don't allow on-the-fly trimming of VTA and simply can't offer azimuth adjustment, while the complex structure of an arm like the TriPlanar introduces its own set of compromises. The structure and engineering of the 4POINT is an object lesson in functional elegance, offering a range of simple, repeatable adjustments that allow users to achieve far more accurate set up and, as a result, significantly better sound.

The massive tonearm assembly might look monolithic but is actually a complex and carefully considered component. The headshell is removable, allowing you to mount cartridges and even rotate between models, if you so wish – although that will require resetting the arm's balance, bias, and headshell wiring. The tube itself is split just ahead of the bearing housing, where a long sleeve joint allows you to loosen the front section and precisely rotate it using an Allen key to achieve continuous yet incremental adjustment of azimuth. The counterweight assembly is a composite arrangement. The large, low slung weight allows you to alter its mass with the range of supplied rings that simply screw onto the stub and lock together, keeping it as close to the pivot as possible to help maximize tracking performance. The small weight in the upper position is used to set tracking force, its two parts lock together allowing you to vary the resistance to rotation. That might seem like a small thing, but when it comes to making those "so small you almost can't feel them" adjustments to VTF that are the difference between a performance that is great and one that is truly magical, that and the simple red dots that provide a rotational reference are what make it happen. Finally, it's possible to remove the entire arm-assembly, keeping all the adjustments intact and replace it with another complete unit with cartridge installed. It's not as straightforward as the same operation on the VPI JMW, as Kuzma requires you to unlock the cable-retaining stub with an Allen key, but that also allows the use of a straight-through wiring harness, eliminating at least one junction in this critical, low-level signal path.

Arm-height can be set using a locking collar, but thereafter, a cam-locked VTA tower allows in-play adjustment of this critical parameter, without any compromise in rigidity. Whether you are a "tickle it for every record" kind of listener, or simply want to optimize arm height when switching between standard and 180/200g audiophile pressings, it's simple, incredibly precise and brilliantly effective. My only complaint? I'd like a finer scale on the rotating dial to make tiny shifts more repeatable, but that aside, the 4POINT is the very model of analogue set-up sanity. It allows you to optimize the arm for the chosen cartridge and then set that cartridge up, with every parameter separate, independently, and easily adjustable. If only all tonearms worked like this, the world would be a better place!

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** 14" tonearm with unique Kuzma 4POINT bearing system

**Arm mount:** Kuzma

**Mounting distance:** 291mm

**Spindle to pivot:** 342mm

**Effective length:** 353mm

**Effective mass:** 19g

**Removable headshell:** Yes – Kuzma type, spare supplied

**Fingerlift:** Removable

**Adjustments available:** Overhang, bias, vta, azimuth, vertical damping, horizontal damping, c/w mass

**Cable:** Kuzma silver – optional cables and configurations available

**Arm mass:** 2150g

**Price:** £6250

**Manufacturer:** Kuzma Ltd, Preddvor, Slovenia

**URL:** [www.kuzma.si](http://www.kuzma.si)

**UK Distributor:** Audiofreaks

**Tel:** +44 208 948 4153

**URL:** [www.audiofreaks.co.uk](http://www.audiofreaks.co.uk)

► that helped make the standard 4POINT so attractive, along with a level of performance that, like the VPI JMW 3D tonearm before it, raises the level of musical invisibility possible from a tonearm. Until you hear an arm like the 14 you have no idea just how audible an impact your tonearm is having. The standard 4POINT is a very, very good arm; in fact, it is the most consistent, musically convincing, and engaging arm I've ever used at home – until now. The 4POINT 14 isn't just better; bigger, heavier, and longer, it is both reductionist and pointless trying to put your finger on what exactly makes that difference, but it's a difference that's way too big to ignore. Is more necessarily better? I don't think that's a given, but once you hear the 4POINT 14, it's awfully hard to go back. +



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Neil Gader, The Absolute Sound, Newport Show 06-06-2014

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Home Theater and High Fidelity, Newport Beach Show 2014

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# Spread Spectrum Technologies Son of Ampzilla II power amplifier

by Eric Neff

**H**igh-end audio as we think of it today is about fifty years old. Some brands from the early days are still around and iconic today. Others have faded into fond memories of beautiful musical moments gone by. Few companies have proven successful in maintaining their creativity and innovation after the passing of the visionary founder.

In the case of Spread Spectrum Technologies, a fortuitous introduction between founder James Bongiorno (1943-2013) and EJ Sarmiento of Wyred 4 Sound cemented the continuation of the company. Bongiorno had a long design history with brands such as Dynaco, Sumo, SAE, GAS, Constellation, and others. He was looking for someone who had the engineering and manufacturing knowledge to put his innovative ideas into wider production, and EJ was

the perfect partner given his extensive industry background and with many of his own product innovations. The goal was to maintain the core of Bongiorno's circuit designs and his ingenious power supply while ramping up to a true large-scale distribution model.

As Bongiorno's health failed, EJ acquired the rights to Spread Spectrum Technologies with the plan to offer its well-regarded products as well as future designs he and James had discussed as a separate company from Wyred 4 Sound. The products would all be designed and manufactured in the USA. The first product out of the gate is the rebirth of an SST legend, the Son of Ampzilla II.

The original Ampzilla started as a DIY project for Popular Electronics magazine. The design was so popular that James left SAE and started Great American Sound (GAS) to





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PS Audio's new Direct Stream Junior DAC is a more affordable version of the global multi award winning DirectStream DAC. Bringing you the benefits of a pure DSD based solution, DS Junior fulfils the promise of high-resolution analogue performance from digital audio.

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*“I have found in over 30 years of listening that, for a high power amplifier, robust and clean power is a must for quality amplification.”*



► manufacture the Ampzilla for retail sale. The original Ampzilla offered 200 Watts into 8 Ohms. The Son of Ampzilla at 100 watts into 8 Ohms followed Ampzilla. Today, the new incarnation – Son of Ampzilla II – gives full weight to its progenitor, coming in at 220 watts into 8 Ohms and 350 Watts into 4 Ohms.

I have found in over 30 years of listening that, for a high fidelity amplifier, robust and clean power is a must for quality amplification. James Bongiorno spent years seeking better ways to bring clean and massive power reserves to his designs. The Son of Ampzilla II does this in part by using a massive 2kVA power supply for each channel, with each side benefiting from its own independent windings. Both channels also have a healthy 100,000µF of capacitance. As expected, the front-end voltage power supplies are fully regulated. Finally, there is a thermal protection automatic shutdown circuit to protect in the event of failure.

Output power is doubled from the original SOA, and SOA II delivers 200 watts into 8 Ohms by doubling the number of power transistors per channel. So it has the strength and reserves to manage most any transient peak for nearly anything but concert hall applications.

Given it's such a plastic term, I often wonder what others would require of an amplifier to have it qualify as 'High Fidelity'? Recently I was perusing the Harbeth Users Group and I came across an interesting comment from Alan Shaw, lead designer and owner at Harbeth; "A truly high fidelity amplifier should be load insensitive and no matter what sort of speaker by make, concept, size, impedance or power is clamped across its outputs, the amp should perform identically. And that just does not seem to be the case with many so called 'high-end' amps (whatever that means). They may well be 'high-end' but they cannot meet the elementary definition of 'high fidelity' because the signal that leaves them to drive the speaker does not have the same energy/frequency balance as the signal that arrived at the amp input sockets."

Coming from one of the world's most distinguished speaker designers, this was interesting. So I asked Tony Holt from Spread Spectrum Technologies what he thought of this. His response was; "We agree with Alan on this. Likewise, our amps adhere to his philosophy of 'high-fidelity', which is achieved with solid engineering for exemplary amplifier performance and stability. Both the SoA and Ampzilla 2k are very much in this 'load insensitive' camp, in that their ►

*“What I got from the Son of Ampzilla II was stronger and more solid low-end action without smearing the low mids and midrange.”*

- ▶ outputs are consistently more or less flat across the frequency spectrum regardless of load. We spent a lot of time and effort in the design process to ensure this.”

Nice to know I am in good company in thinking this amp is High Fidelity!

To get started I disconnected my Cary SLI-80 Tube integrated with the Ultimate Mod package, which I had been using in amp-only mode, and then went to the robust, double-boxed SST shipping container. I placed the Son of Ampzilla II on my amp stand atop three Stillpoints Ultra 6 isolation devices. I then connected the Son of Ampzilla II to my Moon Neo 430HAD Pre-amp/headphone amplifier for some initial digital files listening. The Simaudio Moon Neo 430 HAD offers many of the refinements of the Simaudio Evolution 740p Preamplifier with the notable exception of it being single ended output only. The optional built in DAC uses the highly regarded ESS9018 Sabre chip and it can handle PCM to 24/384 and DSD256. Files were served from a 2012 MacMini via Roon connected by a Light Harmonic Lightspeed 10G cable. I then connected the Son of Ampzilla II to my Vandersteen 2Ce Signature II speakers using Blue Jeans speaker cables. With all the connections accounted for it was time to queue up some music.

I have owned the Cary for many years and it has been my go-to amplifier when I am simply interested in enjoying a day of music. Putting in the Son of Ampzilla II would be a change in character and specification. The Cary is a valve amp focused around a quad of Golden Lion KT88's delivering 40 watts into 8 Ohms in the triode mode I favour. The Cary has a seductive midrange without the slow, too-sweet tube character of some tube amps. As expected, placing the SST amp in the mix was quite a change to the listening experience.

First up was Morphine's 'A Head with Wings' from 1993's *A Cure for Pain*. [16/44.1 AIFF iTunes] This is a well-recorded album that makes the most of space and location. The baritone sax and bass guitar really plow the low end. Vocals are dead centre and the drum kit is behind and covers both left and right of vocals as you sense the breadth of the entire drum kit throughout the song. My initial impressions were how well the \$3,500 solid state amp kept up with the nearly \$8,000 Cary tube amp for dimensionality. The sense of front to back was strong and stable. Morphine is an ensemble of

saxophones, bass guitar, vocals, drums, and an occasional guitar. The Son of Ampzilla II provided solid and foundational low-end power for the Vandersteens as the baritone sax and two-stringed bass guitar pulled the tune inexorably forward. What I got from the Son of Ampzilla II was stronger, and more solid low-end action without smearing into the low mids and midrange that the Cary presents so sweetly. Overall a great start to this review.

Switching up genres, I moved on to Aleks Sever's 2012 album *Danger Girl* and the fabulous jazz/blues tune 'Silhouette' [AIFF 16/44.1, iTunes]. Ms Sever is an extremely talented and versatile blues guitarist. With this song, I was able to enjoy the exacting finger work along the fretboard. The drums, bass, rhythm guitar, and Hammond organ flanked her throughout the soundstage at appropriate positions. Her precise playing soared and floated above the supporting cast. When I listen to this type of arrangement I appreciate the sense of being in the club. I want it to be an intimate venue with just a bit of smoke in the darkened room. The Ampzilla brought the front centre table to life. This meant I had the best seat in the house and a presentation that made the time fly by. I ended up listening to the whole album.

Moving on to vinyl, I went to Electric Light Orchestra. *Zoom* [Big Trilby Records 2013] is an album that does not get its due. One of my favorite cuts is 'Moment in Paradise'. I placed the record on my VPI Scout 1.1 with its Dynavector 10X5 high output moving coil cartridge. I secured the LP with my Stillpoints LPI Long Spindle record weight. The ALO Audio Phono Stage connects to the first analogue input on the Simaudio Moon Neo 430 HAD. I love the simple presentation of this song. It is slow and sweet, offering gentle melodies with the guitar, bass, and drums anchoring the presentation. The Son of Ampzilla II allowed each note its own space. Each instrument was positioned in its own appropriate three-dimensional spot. The sense of depth was nice and deep. Again, in contrast to the Cary, the bottom end had a firmer grip than with the valve-based midrange champion. It was a nice contrast to have a wider spectrum functioning together. The extra power of the Son of Ampzilla II allowed the Vandersteen's 100mm bass driver and 150mm passive bass radiator much more to work with and they responded with firm and satisfying bass down into the 29Hz range. ▶

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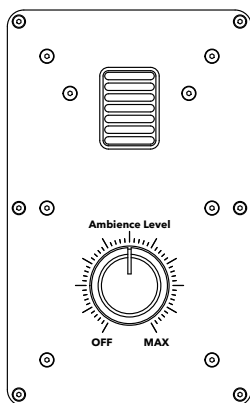
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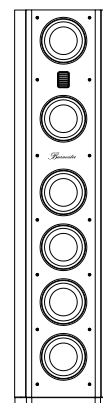
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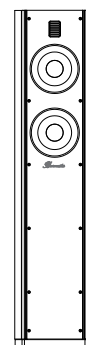
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Dieter Burmester



BA71



BA31

*“The Son of Ampzilla II allows the crescendo to build without distracting from any of the orchestral components. Well done SST!”*

► Switching to classical I put on Eiji Oue and the Minnesota Orchestra’s 1996 performance of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*. [Reference Recordings, 24/88.2 AIFF] I love this particular rendition of this work and I have had the opportunity to hear them live on occasion, as I grew up in the St. Paul, Minnesota area. Classical orchestral works can expose equipment as fast as any other genre. The range of dynamics will lay low amps with insufficient power reserves. Music can build from a single instrument to the full orchestra, potentially smearing the soundstage with indistinct noise. But, a great amp will allow each performer to shine through. Each section can be heard as a cohesive blend within the score. It will paint the notes across the sonic canvas to allow the masterpiece to be seen in all its clarity and colour. There is a point from 5:30 to 8:00 where the intensity builds and layers are added. Tympani strike with power and intensity. It is beautiful. The Son of Ampzilla II allows the crescendo to build without distracting from any of the orchestral components. Well done SST!

For a final listen I was planning on using the the title song from David Bowie’s new album *Blackstar* [Columbia]. I downloaded the 24/96 AIFF from HDTracks.com the minute it came available on January 8th. The news of his passing just two days later had me shift to another track, ‘Lazarus’. Listening to this via the Son of Ampzilla II, I was afforded the opportunity to be one on one with a pinnacle performance of a legend of music. Bowie’s haunting lyrics, which hint at his soon-to-come demise, were accompanied by a tight and intimate performance from his band. The quality of the mastering and the clarity of the recording were a perfect match for the Son of Ampzilla II’s high-end capabilities. The quick snap of the opening snare, the entry of sax and woodwinds with just the right mix of rasp and tone, and the strong and persistent bass guitar all framed Bowie’s clear and still hopeful voice. The song is a message of joy and vision. SST’s latest effort brought full justice to the song, to David Bowie’s creation, and—in a satisfying touch of fate—to the full measure

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS:

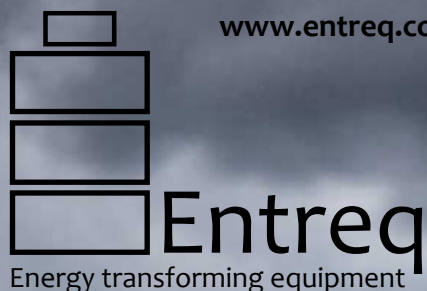
**Type:** Stereo solid-state power amplifier  
**Inputs:** 2x Balanced XLR, 2x single-ended RCA  
**Power Output (per channel, into 8Ω):** Minimum 220 watts 20Hz–20kHz  
**Frequency Response:** 20Hz–20kHz ± 0.1 dB  
**THD (A-weighted):** < 0.03% 20Hz–20kHz @ 8Ω Full power  
**Noise (A-weighted):** 45µV  
**Input Impedance:** 130kΩ balanced, 65kΩ unbalanced  
**Signal/Noise ratio:** 110 dB (20Hz–20kHz)  
**Gain:** 27.5dB, 1.76v RMS for 220 watts 8Ω (either input)  
**Sensitivity:** 1.76 V  
**Dimensions (W×H×D):** 45×14.3×25cm  
**Weight:** 18kg  
**Price:** \$3,500

**Manufactured by:** Wyred 4 Sound  
 4235 Traffic Way, Atascadero, CA 93422,  
 United States  
**Tel:** +1 (805) 466-9973  
**URL:** [www.wyred4sound.com](http://www.wyred4sound.com)

of the rebirth and rise of James Bongiorno’s life-long vision as well.

To sum up, my time with the Son of Ampzilla II has been both a revelation and a privilege. I have never found such a high performing solid-state amplifier at this price point. Generally, it would take a big step up in price to reach these sonic heights. It is also my first opportunity to spend significant time with a James Bongiorno design. But there are so many good designers and so little time to sample their work, I suppose! Highly Recommended +





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Generally the key component to Ground first is often the product at the centre or hub of your system , whether that is your Pre-amplifier, Integrated amplifier or Dac/pre . Next you should consider a source component ; either your CD player / DAC , Streamer , Phono stage etc .

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# INTRODUCING THE NEW KAISER 10U



# Henry Audio USB 128 mk II DAC

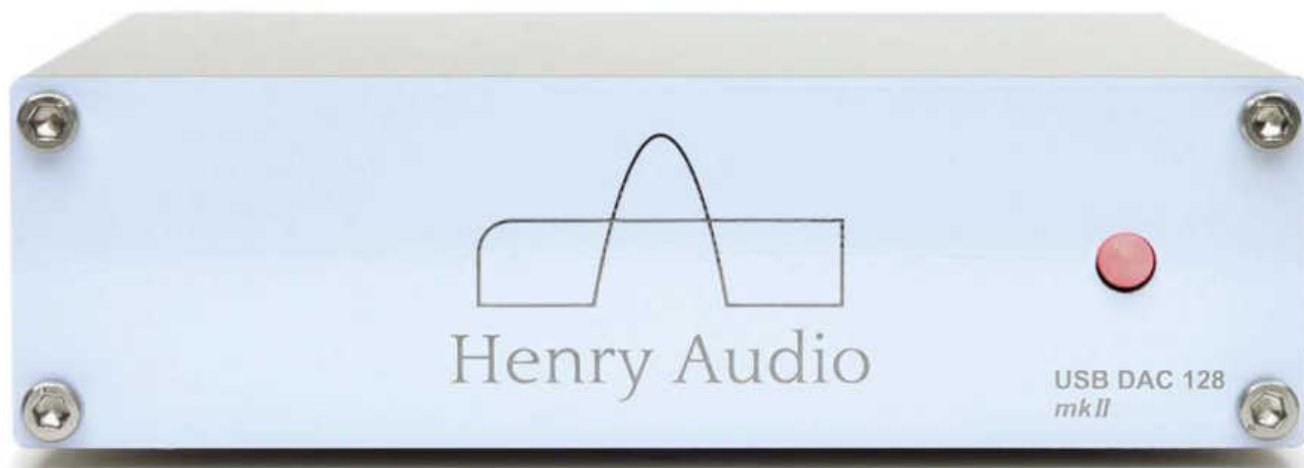
by Alan Sircom

**T**he high-end audio world is too bound up by convention. OK, so denouncing the reactionary bourgeoisie is a bit too 1965 for my tastes (and let's face it, that didn't work out too well in the end), but there's a still radical shake-up in all things audio related that's not only needed, but also taking place right now. And it's very much at the affordable end. The Henry Audio USB 128 mk II is one of those leading the charge.

You see, the Henry Audio USB 128 mk II began life as an open source project, built in the Philippines but with Børge Strand-Bergesen heading up the project from his home in Norway. The early iterations had Alpha Geek names like 'The Audio Widget' and 'Quantization Noise Killed The Cat' before settling on the more prosaic – but

altogether more marketable – Henry Audio. Irrespective of name, the device has a solid following on the digital DIY forums and discussion groups, because its firmware is programmable and experimentation is encouraged (hence the 'prog' and 'reset' buttons on the rear panel).

The base specifications of the USB 128 mk II is simple: it's based around the AKM4430 'all-in-one' chip, with a Atmel AVR32 programmable microcontroller chip and ADP151 low drop out voltage regulators running at 3.3V, meaning the 5V USB limit is well preserved. The user manual informs you that the power supply is ripe for tangling with, and there are "lots of internal headers for experimenting". Even the circuit design and pin-outs are provided in the manual for the hardcore user. Anyone with a good working knowledge of C and an understanding of digital audio works can play! Normally, we'd criticise a DAC that had exposed allen bolts front and rear for being a little bit rough-edged, but as Henry Audio is going to go to a significant number of people who will open the casework in minutes, this is to be applauded. A single LED on the front panel represents the sole operational functionality. That all being said, the little brushed case is not bad; it sits on three little clear blobs so it doesn't scratch your worksurface, and the logo on the plastic front panel sets the Henry apart from something knocked together in a shed. ▶







► If that last paragraph reads a bit too 'DIY' for you, the Henry's basic DAC configuration is pretty good, too. It will run as an Asynchronous USB DAC in Class 1 or Class 2 USB Audio modes. As ever, it will support both Class 1 and 2 native in Mac OS X (and, given this is the programmer's dream DAC, Linux), but you need to download an ASIO driver for Windows PCs. Fortunately, as an open source project, good, robust drivers are available from the site. Given its open source background, I thought the Henry might go into forced self-destruct mode if used with anything apart from Foobar 2000, but in fact it's the perfect partner and I happily connected it to the evil empire of iTunes and not a single shot was fired in revolt.

It's a really good DAC, too. If the 'hax0r' mood doesn't take you, and you simply use the Henry as a USB converter, you are faced with a device that teases out the spirit and emotion of the music, rather than the detail. It's an extremely refined sounding DAC and not for the money; it's an extremely refined sounding DAC regardless of price. It's the kind of converter you can happily slot into some extremely nice sounding valve amp system costing grillions, and it has that easy, unforced and slightly back-from-the-loudspeakers presentation, rather than the etched, up-front, in-your-face kind of detail-driven sound so many pass off as 'high-end'.

And that's the big defining moment here. If you think of high-end as a sonic goal, one to try and reproduce the musical intent with the highest possible fidelity and produce a sound that you want to sit in front of for the longest time, the Henry is every millimetre a high-end DAC. It made a lot of sense of 'Back Country Suite: Blues' by Mose Allison [*Back Country Suite*, Prestige], which was famously covered by the Who at the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970. This is a track that is effectively 'owned' by that cover, but the Henry lets Allison win it back, thanks to the richness and sheer effortlessness of the presentation.

Putting this into context, the DAC's unforced presentation is not that dissimilar from the performance from considerably more expensive designs, but where those more expensive designs justify their continued existence is in a greater sense of authority, image size, and detail. The Henry Audio DAC has the dynamic range and the tonal balance of the likes of the Nagra HD, but what it lacks is the dynamic shading and sheer detail that sets the top end players apart from the pack. At less vertiginous prices, what you tend to get is that detail (again), but at the expense of some or all of that expressive richness of tone.

The obvious direct comparisons with the Henry are between it and the AudioQuest DragonFly DAC – the form factor might be different, but there are more similarities than you might first think. The Henry is tonally very different; where DragonFly is 'exciting', the Henry is 'mellow'. Ultimately, I marginally preferred the overall balance of the AudioQuest DAC, because it was more capable with the frantic pace of the backbeat on 'Love Cry' from Four Tet's *There Is Love In You* album [Domino], but I also found much to like in the Henry's sublime flow through the title track from *Lift Your Skinny Fists Like Antennas to Heaven*, by Godspeed You! Black Emperor [Constellation], and any devices that can play that awesome slice of dark ambient wonderfulness well wins big in my book.

The downsides? Well, it's pretty basic – just a mini USB input (rather than the USB-B connector preferred by audio cable makers) and one single lock light. People wanting to connect Ethernet devices or CD players running AES/EBU are left out in the cold. It's also not going to deliver the highest of ►

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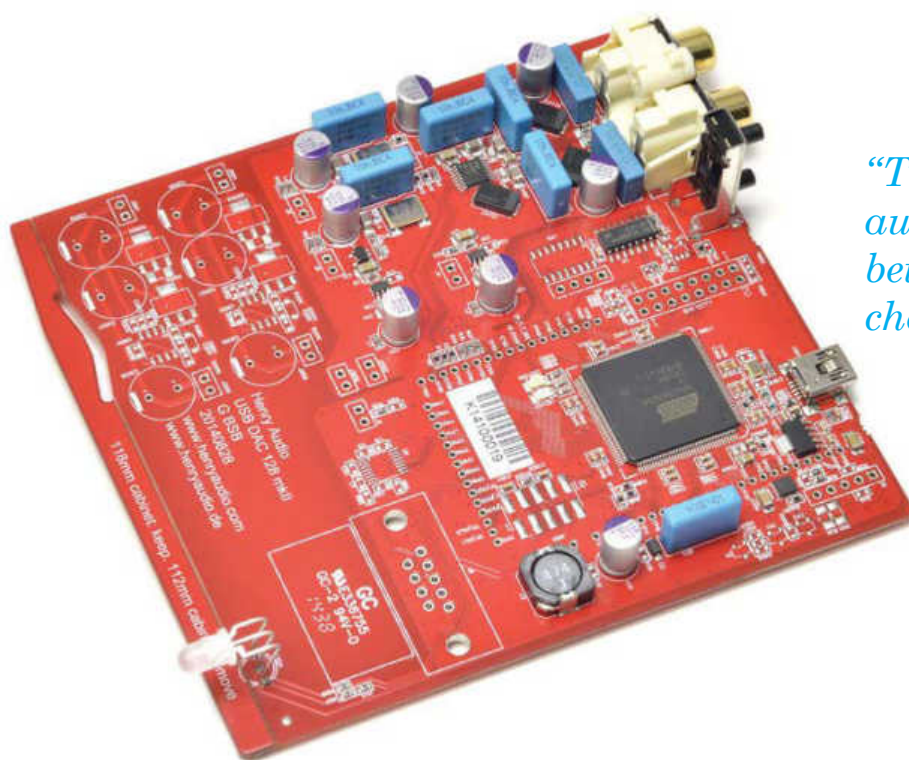


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*“The tools that make audio great are both better, and often cheaper, than ever.”*

► high-resolution audio; if your computer's hard drive is brimming over with DSD files, the Henry Audio is not your go-to DAC. Although, thanks to the open source nature of the DAC and the relatively open-ended design of that AK chip, the 192kHz limit could evolve in time; it may already have evolved, as someone's written firmware for 32bit, 384kHz processing on one of the forums!

Perhaps the biggest downside though has nothing whatsoever to do with its basic design, and instead comes down to credibility with the credulous. It's not in a box eight times larger and fifteen times heavier. It's not got the word 'Reference' in its title, and the company name doesn't sound like pig Latin. It's not powered from the wall, necessitating a cable that cost more than your first, second, and third cars combined. It doesn't have balanced connections that you decided you would never use but like the concept of. It doesn't come with the design intervention of someone who looks a little like Methuselah's older brother. It doesn't have a tube in the output stage, and it doesn't have a big fluoro display. Most importantly for a certain kind of DAC buyer, the Henry costs about one-twentieth as much as it should for a converter to be taken seriously. But as I said, audio is a world bound by its conventions, and for companies like Henry Audio to break those conventions means some people won't be happy with the results. More fool them!

It's hard to separate price from performance with the USB 128 mk II, but in a good way. Henry Audio joins a small – but growing – list of companies that make products that overturn the status quo in audio, making products that surprise you in making a sound that good for that little money. It proves there has never been a better time to be a music lover, because the tools that make that music sound great are both better, and often cheaper, than ever. It's a crying shame that so much of the audiophile's gaze is directed upward at ever more aspirational products; while they are great, we need to periodically get back in touch with our roots, and the Henry Audio USB 128 mk II does just that. I never thought I'd use the B-word in audio, but this really is a bargain! +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Type: open-source programmable  
USB DAC

Input: mini USB, Asynchronous

Output: RCA stereo

Sampling rates supported: 44.1–192kHz

DAC: AKM4430

USB Types: Class 1 and Class 2

(Class 2 requires ASIO driver on  
Windows only)

Fully user programmable

Dimensions (W×H×D): 11.4×3.3×12.8cm

Price: £159

Manufactured by: Henry Audio

Tel: +47 9063 9918

URL: [www.henryaudio.com](http://www.henryaudio.com)

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# Musical Fidelity Nu-Vista 800 integrated amplifier

by Jimmy Hughes

**W**hen it comes to amplifiers, Musical Fidelity can probably claim a unique authority over almost all their rivals, past and present, having offered just about every option known to man. So it was perhaps unsurprising that in 1999 the company launched a range of audio products using the fabled nuvistor – a thermionic device that offered all the benefits of tubes with added toughness, reduced noise, lower microphony, higher reliability, and extremely compact size.

Musical Fidelity's earlier Nu-Vista designs are now discontinued, due to a lack of

nuvistor bases. Fortunately, Musical Fidelity supremo Antony Michaelson was able to track down a new supply, making it possible to manufacture a range of Nu-Vista components for those of us who missed out first time.

The Nu-Vista 800 is a stereo line-level integrated amplifier offering around 300W per channel. The thick, brushed aluminium fascia has an exquisite feel to it. The two large knobs, for volume and input selection, feel impressively weighty and solid. The illuminated feet (which change colour three times to denote the amp's warm-up status) and the valve glow adds a touch of 'theatre'. It's big, measuring around 50cm square, and about 18cm tall, and it's a hernia-inducing 38 kilos, thanks in part to two huge power transformers.

Given that it's 2016, I was slightly surprised not to see a USB input being offered. But the omission of any digital inputs is intentional – Antony wanted to keep the Nu-Vista 800 purely analogue. Fortunately, there is a matching Nu-Vista CD player, which provides pretty much everything you're likely to need from a digital hub. According to Antony Michaelson, CD is not dead: in fact, the company's CD players are proving extremely popular. ▶





▶ The signal paths in the Nu-Vista 800 amp are very short. The amp makes use of surface mount PCB design, with improved track layouts. The nuvistors themselves are mounted very close to the preamp circuits, with tracks at right-angles to minimise induced field effects. The net result is a sound hair-trigger sharp and immediate

The Nu-Vista 800 is a pleasure to use, and I particularly liked the volume control with its precise readout in decibels. The volume goes in fine 0.5dB steps, but the design of the Nu-Vista 800's volume control allows fast changes in level – if required.

Normally, with electronic volume controls such as this, the change in level as you spin the knob is quite slow and measured. Since the control revolves continuously, you might have to turn it three or four times to get (say) a 10dB change. However, the volume control on the Nu-Vista 800 is sensitive to the speed at which you turn it.

Move it quickly, and it increases or decreases volume by a larger margin than

turning it slowly. Great! The knob on the left controls input selection, and has soft indent points for each setting – CD, Tuner, Balanced, and Aux 1 and Aux 2. There's also a by-pass option for home cinema use. The preamp offers unbalanced and balanced inputs and outputs

During use, the Nu-Vista 800 gets mildly warm to the touch. Unless you push it really hard, it doesn't get hot. Nor is there any mechanical sound, despite the use of two monster transformers. Even with my ear literally right by the unit I could hear no transformer hum or buzz, and no residual noise whatsoever from the loudspeakers. In effect, the amp is silent.

My regular amplifier is a Musical Fidelity kW-750 partnered with a Classé CP-800. From time to time I've dallied with low-powered tube amps, and thoroughly enjoyed the experience, but I always go back to the kW-750 with a sense of relief because it's utterly bomb-proof. No matter what music I play, no matter how loud, it never bottoms out. It has endless headroom, and I like that.

On paper at least, the Nu-Vista 800 isn't quite as powerful as the kW-750. But it has the same sort of muscle and drive; subjectively, even more so, perhaps. How? Well, the Nu-Vista 800 delivers music with an attack that's almost fearsome. It produces an immediacy and bite that really is quite exceptional. The sense of presence and focus is amazing...

This amp is an interesting mix of opposites. On the one hand it's exceptionally clean and very tactile. Transients have impressive attack, and the whole presentation exudes an 'abruptness' that makes the music sound crisp and alert. At the same time, there's a lovely rich/sweet tonal sheen and liquidity that creates a very relaxed and flowing impression. ▶



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# SME

*"The best pick-up arm in the world"*

*“And the extra bass weight has a reciprocal effect at the top-end, making the treble sound sweeter and airier.”*

► And then there's the bass... The very first track I listened to was the scherzo movement from Leonard Bernstein's DG recording of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*. It sounded wonderfully spacious and airy, with a very holographic 'out of the speaker boxes' soundstage. I really felt I could listen right through the sound of the orchestra, so that even the tiniest detail was audible.

In addition to the music however, I was aware of some distant traffic rumble, and also some rostrum thumps from the energetic Bernstein. These spurious sounds were not obtrusive; they simply added to the experience of being there in the hall. The traffic noise almost seemed disembodied – as though it really was coming from the distant ringstrasse...

No question; the Nu-Vista 800's bass is quite exceptional. It has impressive depth and weight, while at the same time being unusually clear, very solid, and powerful. It almost seemed to add an extra octave; I hardly exaggerate. It really does seem to extend the low frequencies. And the extra bass weight has a reciprocal effect at the top-end, making the treble sound sweeter and airier.

Even my wife noticed the difference. Over the following few weeks, she'd spontaneously remark that things were sounding good – meaning, 'better than usual'. It was true; my thoughts were exactly the same! Not that everything played via the Nu-Vista 800 was all sweetness and light. It's actually a very revealing amplifier – one that shows small differences quite clearly.

The use of Nu-Vista tubes might impart a certain sweetness and liquidity, but there's nothing falsely euphonic or rose-tinted about the overall presentation. The Nu-Vista 800 can sound lean and mean when it needs to, and doesn't pull its sonic punches. In comparison, my own regular Classé/Musical Fidelity combination proved kinder and more accommodating.

However, by not pointing-up differences as keenly, although the Classé/kW-750 combination was perhaps more forgiving, it was also more generalised and less distinct. It was definitely less special! Going back, I really missed the immediacy of the Nu-Vista 800, and its ability to create a holographic soundstage. It produces vivid stereo imagery, with crisp 'placement' of voices and instruments.

I used the new amplifier more or less straight from the box, without giving it much 'burn in' time. It sounded great, but after a few weeks' solid use, I definitely felt the Nu-Vista 800 seemed to ease-up a bit, and become a bit more relaxed. There was still no lack of that crisp immediacy, but the overall presentation seemed more supple and flowing.

At £8,000 the Nu-Vista 800 is not exactly cheap. But you undoubtedly get a lot for your money: solid build quality and a very high standard of finish. If you doubt the quality, just try to lift the amp! My old kW-750 was very well finished, but the Nu-Vista 800 is on an altogether different level. It oozes quality.

But, don't be fooled; the Nu-Vista 800 is absolutely the genuine article in all the areas where it really counts: sound quality, build quality, and finish. It's

an amp to invest in, secure in the knowledge that it's built to last a lifetime. Antony himself believes it's quite possibly the best-sounding amp MF has ever made, and on balance I think he may be right.

The Nu-Vista 800 offers a winning combination of speed, dynamics, bandwidth, headroom, and attack – plus brilliance and warmth. Yet such words only scratch the surface. With this amp, the total effect is greater than the sum of the parts – even though the parts themselves are superlative. It's certainly made a deep impression on me, and undoubtedly raises the bar a good few notches. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Inputs:** 4x Line Level RCA / Phono,  
1x Line Level XLR Balanced

**Outputs:** 1 pair line level RCA  
connectors, constant level Line  
outputs, 1 pair line level RCA  
connectors, preamp outputs for  
e.g. bi-amping

**Power output:** 330 Watts per channel  
into 8 Ohms

**THD+N:** <0.005 % typical 20Hz–20 kHz

**Signal to Noise Ratio:** >107dB

'A' – weighted

**Frequency Response:** +0, -0.1dB,  
10Hz to 30 kHz

**Dimensions (WxHxD):** 48.3 x 18.7 x 51 cm

**Weight:** 39 kg

**Price:** £8,000

**Manufactured by:** Musical Fidelity Ltd

**URL:** [www.musicalfidelity.com](http://www.musicalfidelity.com)

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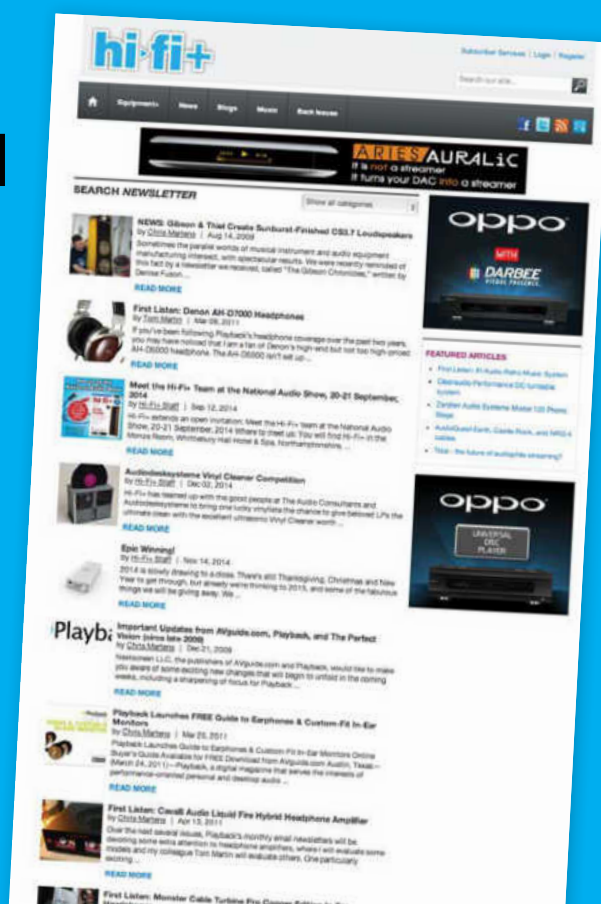
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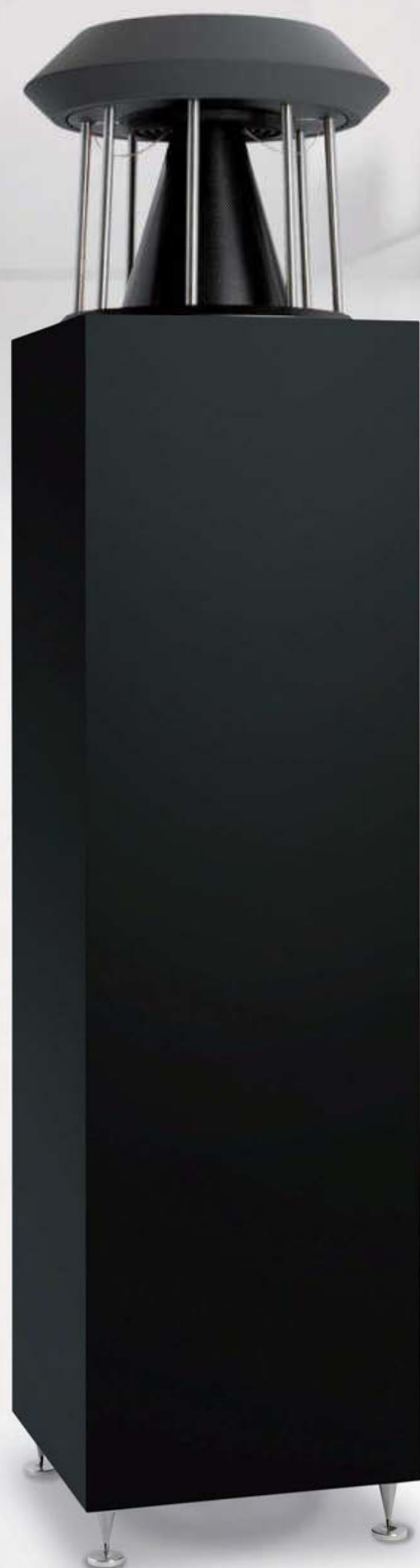
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# Riva Turbo X Bluetooth speaker

by Chris Martens

**S**ince you are reading this magazine, odds are you already own a full-fledged hi-fi system—probably a very good one and quite possibly one that your friends and colleagues consider ‘expensive’. However, if you think back to the earliest days of your interest in our hobby, it’s likely your first system (or first piece of audio equipment) was pretty modest. The important point, of course, is that first ‘starter’ system helped stimulate both your love of music and your appreciation for better-than-average sound quality—pursuits that, we presume, you still find rewarding to this day.

But this train of thought led me to some important questions. For instance, what musically satisfying yet highly cost effective choices are available to today’s newcomers to the world of high-performance audio? And in a related vein, what sort of playback ‘system’ actually makes the most sense for modern, music-loving newbies? As I’ve pondered these

questions, I reached the conclusion that perhaps the best starter system might not be a traditional system at all, but rather a compact, affordable, yet surprising capable single-chassis device such as the Riva Turbo X Bluetooth speaker.

I first encountered the Riva at the 2015 SoCal CanJam event, where the Riva team was proudly showing audiophiles and discerning headphonistas alike the capabilities of their pint-sized Turbo X. What struck me and many other listeners present was the tiny Riva’s uncannily smooth and full-bodied sound, coupled with its unexpected, big-system-like quality of three-dimensionality. It’s always tempting, of course, to be wowed by small devices that sounds bigger than they look, but with the Riva I think there is something deeper going on; namely, an ability not only to sound ‘big’, but also to sound good and in ways likely to appeal to audiophile sensibilities.

The Riva is the brainchild of a firm called Audio Design Experts, Inc. (or ADX, for short) whose Chairman and Chief





*“My assessment is that the Turbo X offers best-in-class performance for products of its size, type, and price.”*

- Creative Officer is the charismatic former rock’n’roll impresario Rikki Farr, ably complemented by the firm’s President and Chief Technology Officer Donald North. Together, Farr and North make a great team, with Farr supplying the vision for what his firm’s products should be and do, while North provides the creativity, technical know-how, and sheer inventive genius to turn Farr’s ideas into real-world products. In the case of the Riva Turbo X the result is a product that falls in a familiar category (Bluetooth speakers), but that proves from the outset that it is—to use one of my favourite British expressions—‘a bit special’ (although that’s putting things mildly).

The Riva Turbo X is a small, 230mm wide oblong speaker with a wraparound grille made of perforated metal, trimmed either in black or white and silver, and fitted with a top-mounted set of seven touch-sensitive control switches (power on/off, Trillium Surround mode on/off, input switching/Bluetooth pairing, mute, volume down, volume up, and Turbo EQ mode). At the rear of the Riva is a small connection bay featuring a 3.5mm stereo analogue input jack, a USB data port (for firmware updates), a master battery on/off switch, a USB iPod/iPhone charging port, a 19V power supply input socket, and a battery status indicator light.

On the inside, the Turbo X is fitted with three proprietary ADX 60mm full-range drivers, plus four proprietary ABX dual-piston bass radiators. Powering this array is a three-channel amplifier with a total of 45 watts RMS output power, plus processing circuitry as needed to support the Riva’s three main playback modes. These modes include: Normal listening mode (in essence, a three-channel stereo mode), Trillium Surround mode (an astonishingly effective simulated surround mode intended for home theatre or gaming applications, but also excellent for music listening), and Turbo EQ mode (essentially a ‘kick out the jams’ mode that applies both special EQ and dynamic compression settings to allow the Turbo X to produce output levels as high as 100dB). Additionally, the Turbo X offers a Speakerphone mode when paired with Bluetooth capable smartphones, and a Phono mode that allows the AUX analogue input to be reconfigured as a phono input.

As you can imagine, the Riva lends itself to several real-world playback applications. First and foremost, it is a very fine-sounding Bluetooth speaker and speakerphone. Next,

though, the Riva can be connected, via included cables, to the analogue outputs of disc players, Blu-ray players, or even flat panel televisions, making the Turbo X a lovely little single-chassis TV speaker that can do a fairly convincing imitation of a surround sound system: not bad for a speaker roughly the size of a box of tissues. The unit is not supplied with a remote control, but Riva offers its Ground Control smartphone app through the App Store and through Google Play. The Ground Control app supports volume up/down/mute functions, provides controls for the Trillium Surround and Turbo EQ modes, monitors battery life, manages audio prompts, and allows user to set the app’s background colours.

The real proof of the Riva Turbo X’s merits come not in its features set, but rather in the listening, where my assessment is that the Turbo X offers best-in-class performance for products of its size, type, and price. For my listening tests I primarily ran the Turbo X via Bluetooth connections to an Apple iPad Air 2 tablet and from a Samsung Galaxy S5 smartphone loaded with lossless PCM files. With both devices, pairing with Riva proved easy to accomplish, so that I was able to get under way within a matter of seconds from starting the pairing process.

From the outset, the Riva distinguishes itself from other compact Bluetooth speakers through its admirable smoothness, generally full-bodied sound, energetic upper bass, and—when the Trillium Surround mode is engaged—through its surprisingly wide, deep soundstages. As an example, listen to ‘Wicked Game’ from Chris Isaak’s *Heart Shaped World* [Reprise] and note the Riva’s sweet, silky smooth rendition of the song’s soaring guitar lines, Isaak’s lilting crooner’s voice, and the loping bass pulse that gently drives the song forward. What the Riva does so well (and that lesser Bluetooth speakers barely do at all) is to allow the guitar riffs to float upwards on the air, while Isaak’s voice fills (yet does not overpower) a broad and expansive soundstage, even as the bass manages to sound deeper and more solid than seems possible given the Turbo X’s compact size. It’s with sheer depth and width of the stage that many listeners—this one included—find particularly pleasing and compelling.

But enjoyable though listening with the Trillium Surround mode engaged can be, there are certain songs—especially those involving overlaid voices—where Normal mode lends a heightened degree of focus and definition that is very ►

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*“All in all, I think the Riva Turbo X makes a wonderful starting point for potential audiophiles.”*

► desirable. A good illustration might be ‘Who by Fire’ from Leonard Cohen’s *Live in London* [Sony], where Normal mode does a better job than Trillium Surround mode in terms of drawing out the gritty textures and subtle inflections of Cohen’s deep baritone voice. Where Trillium Surround mode gives the sound greater depth and width, Normal mode gives the presentation greater resolution and a tighter sense of overall focus.

Frankly, the Riva Turbo X tends to provide plenty of volume, even in relative large rooms, so I felt little need to explore the Riva’s signature Turbo EQ model. However, certain songs, such as some of guitarist Joe Satriani’s more high-energy, groove orientated efforts, fairly beg to be cranked up, and for those moments the Turbo EQ mode is just what the doctor ordered. Just bear in mind, though, that prolonged use of the Turbo EQ mode will dramatically reduce battery life (from a high of 26+ hours at moderate levels down to just 6+ hours with the pedal-to-the-metal Turbo EQ mode engaged).

All in all, I think the Riva Turbo X makes a wonderful starting point for potential audiophiles in the making and in particular for those who have never owned sound systems of any kind before. While purists might rightly argue that a compact Bluetooth speaker is no substitute for a proper loudspeaker based hi-fi system, the fact of the matter is that the Turbo X delivers an awful lot of music for not very much money, while offering terrific convenience, ease of use, portability, and the elusive but all-important ‘fun factor’ that keeps users coming back for more. Music lovers with limited budgets and/or tight space constraints may find that the Riva Turbo X is the user-friendly, real-world hi-fi system they have been looking for—and one that can come along when they travel, too. +

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** Compact, three-channel Bluetooth speaker system

**Driver complement:** three ADX 60mm full-range drivers, four ADX dual-piston bass radiators

**Inputs:** aptX Bluetooth input, 3.5mm stereo analogue input, USB data port for firmware updates and future upgrades

**Outputs:** USB charging port for iPods/iPhones.

**Audio Codecs supported:** SBC, AAC, aptX.

**Remote Control apps:** Riva Ground Control smartphone apps are available free of charge from the App Store and from Google Play

**Amplifier power:** 3 × 15Wpc RMS

**Battery Life:** 26+ hours at 75dB, 6+ hours in Turbo mode at maximum output

**Playback modes:**

Normal: A three-channel stereo playback mode.

Trillium Surround: A proprietary simulated surround mode.

Turbo: A combination EQ and high-output mode that allows output levels to reach 100dB.

**Speakerphone mode:** The Turbo X is microphone equipped and can serve as a speakerphone when used in conjunction with Bluetooth capable smartphones

**Phono mode:** By pressing a specific combination of input selections buttons, the Turbo X’s AUX analogue input can be used as a phono input

**Accessories:**

Standard: 19V battery charging power supply, AC power cord, 3.5mm-to-3.5mm analogue input cable (48-inch), 3.5mm-to-dual-RCA-plug analogue input cable (70-inch), and splash resistant rubber input jack cover. Optional: Padded, heavy canvas carry bag with built-in accessory pouch.

**Dimensions (H×W×D):** 105mm × 89mm × 230mm

**Weight:** 1.6kg

**Price:** £229

**Manufacturer Information:** Riva Audio

**URL:** [www.rivaaudio.com](http://www.rivaaudio.com), [www.rivaaudio.co.uk](http://www.rivaaudio.co.uk)

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# Questyle CMA800R headphone amplifier

by Alan Sircom

**O**K, I have to admit this review of the Questyle CMA800R had a painfully long gestation period, due to me getting it colossally wrong at the outset. You see, my 'go to' place for running headphone amplifiers involves connecting them to a decent DAC and using my pair of ever-reliable Sennheiser HD-25-1 II ENG/Studio cans. This is because the HD-25 design is sufficiently sensitive to be driven

by anything. And in the CMA800R, that wasn't like putting the headphone amp in low gear; it was like switching it off!

So, when the CMA800R returned the sound of the Sennheiser HD-25-1 II, I made a rookie error: I expected 'magic' and benched the Questyle. And it stayed benched. It was only reading just how much the company's QP1R digital audio player took our Publisher Chris Martens that I remembered this was lurking in the back of our storeroom. ▶





*“Essentially, current mode acts as it sounds like it acts: the signal is amplified by modulating the current rather than the voltage.”*

► In fact, there were two of them, because one of the great joys of this headphone amp is it lends itself very easily to monoblock use. In fact, the CMA800R now forms just one part of the company's top four-box desktop stack, comprising DSD-ready DAC, preamp, and mono headphone amps (the preamp, originally commissioned by Stax and designed to complement the Stax SR-009 Earspeaker/SRM 727MkII, can act as a useful controller in its own right, both improving overall performance and bringing one volume to rule them all). There is also a special Golden version, which uses higher specified components, as well as the gold finish. We'll look to the full stack in a later issue – first it's time to catch up with the CMA800R as a one-box headphone amplifier.

This is a pure headphone amplifier, without a DAC. The CMA800R has one stereo balanced and one stereo single-ended input (with a small toggle switch on the front panel, it's almost best to think this a one-input amplifier), and a pair of single-ended outputs to a preamplifier. There is also a single full-balanced XLR input, should you decide to use two CMA800R as a mono pair of headphone amps. There are two single-ended ¼" TRS jack sockets for single-ended headphones, and a balanced headphone output XLR for one half of a true balanced headphone output.

The 'CMA' in the title stands for 'Current Mode Amplifier'. This is the defining aspect of the headphone amplifier, and in many ways shows why Questyle chief designer Wang Fengshuo (Jason Wang) is so highly respected in the audio field that a company like Stax would approach him to build an amplifier. And it owes its development at least in part to a failed experiment. While still at university in 2004, Wang was debugging a failed current mode circuit that should have been processing communications signals, but was instead acting as a high-speed amplifier with vanishingly low intermodulation distortion. Wang, already a music loving audiophile, hit the books to see if this circuit had been used in audio amplification, and fortunately his teachers saw the innovator rather than the failed circuit, and let him run with the concept.

Wang and his classmates ultimately designed an exceptionally high performance audio circuit, and his search for other designs only partly bore fruit. He recognised that companies like Krell were beginning to explore the advantages of current mode, in the company's CAST (current audio signal

transmission) system, but where CAST uses current mode a means whereby signals can pass from device to device with the minimum of noise and distortion, Wang applied the technology across the entire amplifier.

Essentially, current mode acts as it sounds like it acts: the signal is amplified by modulating the current rather than the voltage. Current and voltage are not exactly strange bedfellows as their relationship is forged in Ohm's law, and the resultant current mode amplifier creates an inherently low distortion and wide bandwidth design. Current mode is a very common amp design in high-speed communications and video processing. The CMA800R features an additional voltage-controlled current source and a current amplifier in front of a more traditional Class A output stage, but creating those two amplifier stages requires a low-impedance negative feedback circuit that reacts a couple of orders of magnitude faster than conventional voltage mode amp designs. In addition, the amplifier's slew rate achieves a linear increase as input signal amplitude increases, in direct proportion to the input signal amplitude. When receiving a high amplitude signal, a current mode's amplifier's slew rate is much faster than traditional voltage mode devices, eliminating intermodulation distortion and ensuring a high amplitude signal, with an extremely wide linear bandwidth and an almost distortion free realistic playback.

The other big advantage here for Questyle is Wang is not simply an electronics designer, but a keen listener, and spent four years, 22 model iterations, and eight complete back-to-the-drawing-board circuit redesigns in order to make a circuit that is notionally a world-beater, into something that sounds a true world-beater, too. Having developed the CMA800R circuit, Wang Fengshuo then stacked the amp full of some of the best components you can get (Nichicon and WIMA capacitors, mil-spec DALE resistors, Shottky rectifiers, and a custom Plitron toroidal transformer), designed into an elegant, all-business milled aluminium chassis, and handed the manufacture over to electronics experts Foxconn. Well, if it's good enough for Apple...

Going after a complete rethink in amplifier design is all well and good, but the more pivotal questions are 'why?' and 'what does it do for the sound?' In fact both questions are answered in one: using current mode delivers and ►

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Hi-Fi Choice issue 370 2013

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Hi-Fi World Jul 2014

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hi-fi+

issue 118

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*“When it comes to headphone amps, the Questyle CMA800R is all I’ll ever need. And if I need more, there’s always the second CMA800R!”*

► amplifier that reacts to real-world dynamic signals we listen to (as well as steady-state signals we measure to) better than other designs. My rookie error with the Sennheisers actually masked what the CMA800R does so well – deliver the sound of your headphones, without grace or favour. With a pair of headphones designed for use with the output of any passing video camera, mixing desk, or smartphone, that’s no big deal. They are designed to deliver detail at this grade, but lack the nuance and finesse to go deeper into the music beyond a basic analytical level: that’s not a criticism of the HD-25-1 II, but more a statement of design intent.

Push the headphone envelope and the CMA800R just keeps telling you what those headphones are capable of and what the DAC is capable of, too. Not in an artificial, hyper-revealing way (although if you use a DAC or a set of headphones that is lacking in some manner, the Questyle CMA800R will expose that limitation – it just isn’t so edgy that it sounds like its parading the limitations of other devices), but in a way that highlights everything about the up and downstream components.

The CMA800R is a phenomenally dynamic amplifier, too. In a way, it sounds ‘free’ in the way some of the best single-ended triode amps can sound with efficient loudspeakers, but without the lush midrange and lack of high-frequency extension. It’s extraordinarily detailed and transparent, too, and there’s one last feather in its cap: the other part of the name – that ‘800’ part comes from the fact the amplifier was designed as a result of Wang listening to the Sennheiser HD800 and thinking it was a great headphone in search of an amplifier. If you own a pair of HD800s, this is your amplifier. Stop looking – this is it! And if you don’t own a pair of HD800s, but something in the same vein, this is probably your amplifier too! In fact, the only limitation to the CMA800R is that some of the more difficult headphone loads would need more amplifier lifting power to drive them. Like, maybe, a second CMA800R...

I think the CMA800R is the headphone amp that grows with you. Good headphones require a great amplifier, and that’s where the Questyle CMA800R comes in. It’s so good, you might start to look at the matching CAS192D DAC, possibly even driven by the Questyle DAP. At which point the weak spot is your good pair of headphones, and you change the cabling for balanced operation. Rather than have

## TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

**Type:** balanced and single-ended headphone amplifier

**Input:** One pair XLR stereo, one pair RCA stereo, and single XLR mono balanced

**Output:** Dual 6.35mm stereo headphone jacks, three-pin XLR mono balances output, one pair RCA stereo pre-amp output

**Gain:** 15.5dB

**Frequency Response:** DC–200kHz (+0, –0.3 dB); DC–650kHz(+0, –3 dB)

**Max Output Power:** 180mW (7.5Vrms) @300Ω (stereo), 710mW (15Vrms) @300Ω (mono)

**Sensitivity:** 1.2Vrms

**Impedance:** 47KΩ

**THD+N:** 0.00038% @1kHz, 300Ω (stereo). 0.00026% @1kHz, 300Ω (mono)

**SNR:** 114 dB (stereo), 118dB (mono)

**Dimensions (WxDxH):** 33x33x5.5cm

**Price:** £1,599

**Manufactured by:** Questyle

**URL:** [www.questyleaudio.com](http://www.questyleaudio.com)

**Distributed in the UK by:** SCV Distribution

**URL:** [www.scvdistribution.co.uk](http://www.scvdistribution.co.uk)

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to give up your great headphone amp, you just add another CMA800R. A few months later when you are done with using two volume controls, you’ll buy a CMA800P preamp. To someone who hasn’t experienced the CMA800R that sounds like hyperbole, but to someone who has, it’s the next steps in their headphone enjoyment plan.

It’s not in a reviewer’s interests to stop looking for the next big thing, but I can’t help feeling that when it comes to headphone amps, the Questyle CMA800R is all I’ll ever need. And if I need more, there’s always the second CMA800R! Very highly recommended +



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## Meet Your Dealer: The Audio Consultants

by Alan Sircom

**P**erhaps one of the most consistent specialist dealers in the UK, The Audio Consultants represents the independent face of high-end audio. Rather than ploughing the familiar furrow of standard brand names foreign and domestic, The Audio Consultants instead selects products on the basis of performance and quality.

The company's founder, Stephen Harper, has been a keen audio enthusiast and fiercely independent purveyor of distinguished high-end audio for decades, and we caught up with him at his Aldermaston-based store to discuss the important things in audio today...

### What brands/products do you stock?

I concentrate entirely on two-channel stereo, including sources such as turntables and CD players, amplification, loudspeakers, good quality signal cables, and power cords.

Our major brands are SME, Clearaudio, Nottingham Analogue, Audiodesksysteme, Edge Electronics, Furutech,

Norma Audio, German Physiks, ProAc, ELAC, Harmonic Resolution Systems, and Acustica Applicata.

### What inspired you to get into the industry?

Frustration really. Many, many years ago I had a full Linn/Naim system, including the ubiquitous LP12, and heard some vintage valve amplification at a friend's house. I thought that it sounded really good and asked myself, "why does this sound so much better than the system I have, and that I have paid a lot of money for?" He also had a Townsend Rock turntable and that could not have been more different in sound to the LP12. I then sought demonstrations for current valve amplification in London and nearby Home Counties. Valve amplification was a bit rare in those days but even a central London dealer did not provide a very satisfying demonstration. So I thought, someone has got to do a better job than this – admittedly a bit arrogant of me. So my first operation was started in north London specialising in vinyl replay and valve amplification only. I did realise pretty quickly that not everyone wanted a valve ►



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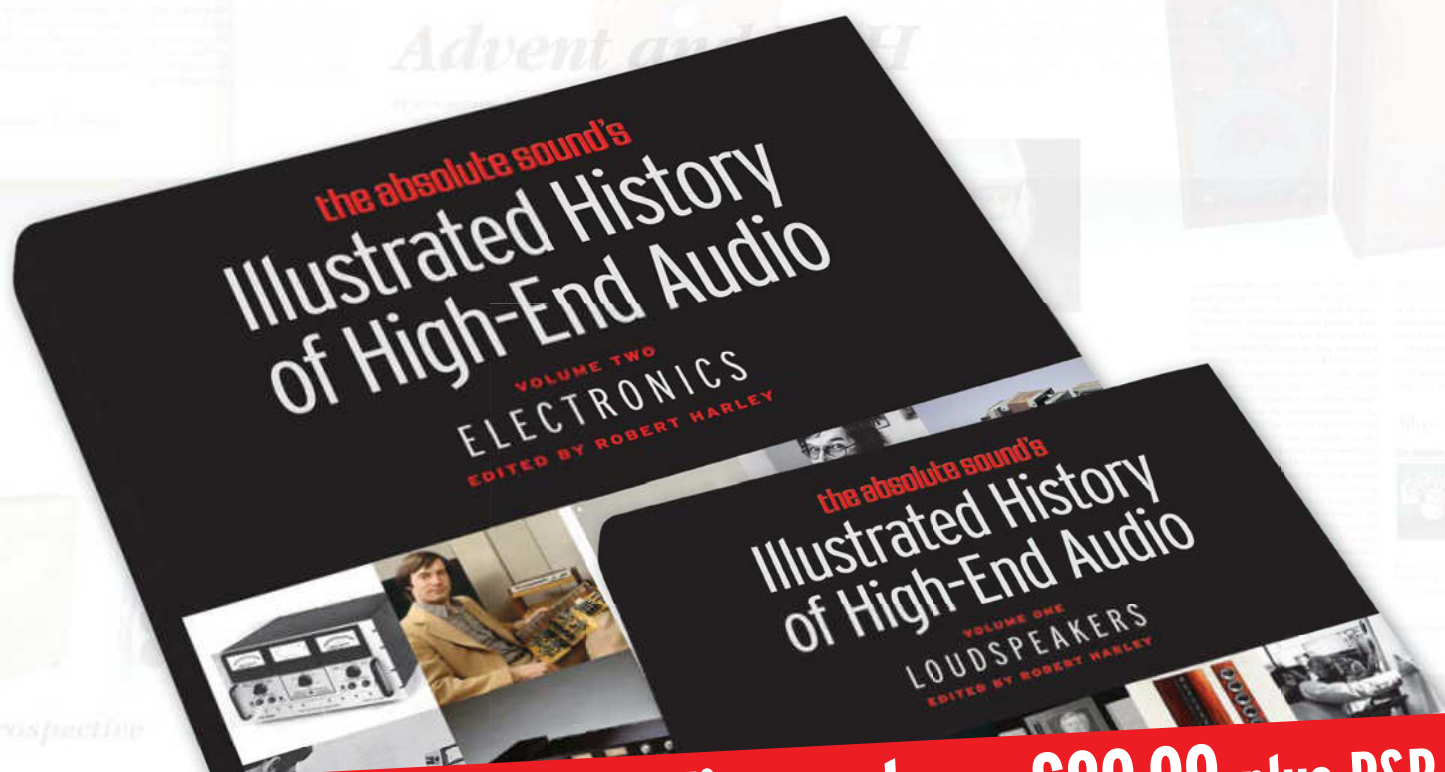
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► amplifier so naturally I had to encompass some solid-state electronics, but chosen from a valve sound stand point. That is to say ones that have a more natural tonal balance and presentation.

#### What music do you listen to when doing a demo?

I encourage customers to bring in their favourite pieces of music and this can cover all types and styles. I have a whole bunch of CDs and LPs that would cover most genres available and these are used for two reasons. One is if some of the customer's recordings are not good enough to illustrate the strengths of the equipment being auditioned. (Sometimes a favourite piece of music is great to listen to, but may not be the best to judge a high quality sound system by). The second is if I think the customer will enjoy a good recording of music of a similar style. I mostly have music that is well recorded, such as on the ECM or Reference Recordings labels. This is usually classical, both orchestral and smaller scale music that includes a piano, and what I call 'chamber' jazz: a trio consisting of piano, acoustic bass, and drums. This can tell you a lot about an audio system, if the recording is good. I personally like improvised music, as well as classical (composed) music, along with the better end of popular music. What is important is to recreate correctly the timbres of the instruments and the space in which it was recorded.

#### What is the best piece of advice you can give to someone who is looking to improve/upgrade their system?

Two pieces of advice really. Try to go to live music concerts as much as possible, and rely on your ears more than what the reviews and technical specifications say.

To judge what instruments really sound like you need to go to unamplified concerts, otherwise you are generally listening to an average PA system at best, or probably one that is too loud and heavily distorted. Unamplified music is today generally limited to classical music; even the jazz players seemed obliged to use amplification, often in venues where it is not needed. Even if you are not keen on classical music, it is useful to buy a ticket and go and hear what natural sound is like and what proper dynamics are all about. I know it is impossible to reproduce that in your home even with the "best hi-fi" system in the world, but with some you can get close to the feeling experienced in a concert hall, and the power of the orchestra. Once you get that right, most other genres of music are reproduced accurately.

Reviews, professional ones or those published on-line, have their place to help make a short list of the component worthy of upgrading. But it is very difficult for them to describe sound. There is also the question of does the person buying have the same criteria as those reviewing. Judging a piece of ►



*“Sadly, the industry is polarising, with very expensive audio products that only a few can afford and equipment that is bought purely on price.”*

- ▶ electronics based simply on technical specifications is more or less useless. There is no measurement device yet invented that tells you what sound is. They just measure electrical parameters. Your ears are the best judge of what subtle differences in sound are. These subtleties are what would make a person buy one component over a competitor.

#### **Where do you see the industry going?**

The higher end of the industry has probably reached such a level of technical excellence that it is difficult to imagine how much better electronics for the accurate reproduction of recorded music can become. They may have reached a pinnacle and it is really fine tuning from here on. However, this end of the market is very small in terms of buyers so the products end up being seriously expensive. Therefore, sadly, the industry is polarising, with very expensive audio components that only a few can afford and equipment that is bought purely on price. The middle ground for the serious audiophile with a limited, perhaps more realistic budget is not going to be catered for easily. This is not such good news and potentially excludes many who have a passion for music but want to reproduce more of what they hear at a live concert at home.

There is also an increasing trend with recent electronic designs towards a brighter tonal balance and a forward presentation, with or without depth of soundstage. All designed to be immediately ‘impressive’. The greatest trick that two-channel stereo pulls off is the illusion of depth. There are many components that do not portray depth and hence they have more of a ‘hi-fi’ sound, rather than a more correct representation of musical instruments with air and space around them. Some re-assessment of what is a natural, less impressive sound is required here.

#### **Who has been your biggest influence?**

In the early days Tom Fletcher, the designer of Nottingham Analogue turntables, showed me how simple, well thought through engineering principles produce a more accurate sound from LPs.

Also assisting in the set-up of a good Audiofreaks system at audio shows, based on Conrad-Johnson amplification and Avalon loudspeakers, demonstrated to me what a true soundstage was.

Talking to Lucien Pichette, then International Sales Manager for Avalon loudspeakers, illustrated how important room placement of loudspeakers was for creating not only a good soundstage but a more correct sound.

Finally, Italo and Fabio of Acustica Applicata have always been generous in passing on their knowledge and experience in how important it was to control room acoustic problems to obtain the best sound the audio equipment is capable of. They still are, and we are all still learning about the importance of room acoustics.

#### **Stereo or home theatre, or both?**

Two-channel stereo only. For accurate music reproduction it is best to keep video replay out of the audio system, because of distortions introduced, so I have never embraced home theatre.

#### **CD, DAC, or streaming, or all three?**

CD and DACs principally. Steaming, or any form of computer based replay, has not proven itself to me yet. And I have tried many that are so called state-of-the-art DACs for this purpose. Most do not produce the musicality or the more natural sound stage presented by a physical disc.

I understand the theory that much higher resolution formats from a computer file are not possible via a physical format such as a CD, but the higher quality that should be present is not always evident in listening. It is still easier to get a very good, musically satisfying sound from physical discs such as a CD or an LP. This is something that should not be the case but that is what my ears are telling me now.

The ability to resolve the finest details that contribute to the illusion of a wide and deep soundstage seems missing. This is counter-intuitive, I grant you, but hopefully this may change with future developments of computer based music replay.

#### **Have you been a part of the vinyl revival? How?**

Since the beginning I have always concentrated on turntables and vinyl related products. For me vinyl never went away so the ‘revival’ is just business as usual. The more recent extra level of interest is most welcome but, in real terms, it is a small increase in the overall business activities. +



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# record reviews

## How To Read Them

The information contained in the record reviews is presented in the following way. Albums are identified by label and – where possible – serial number. Beneath this you will find one or more icons which denote the available formats for the recording. The first icon refers to the format reviewed.

The ratings at the bottom of each review reflect the reviewer's opinion of the recording quality, and musical merits of the album. You'll soon realise that a great many musically significant albums offer less than wonderful sound. Don't let it put you off! For your information, the scale rates a standard, good quality pop recording as slightly below average.

*This issue's featured reviewers are:*

**DD** – Dennis D Davis

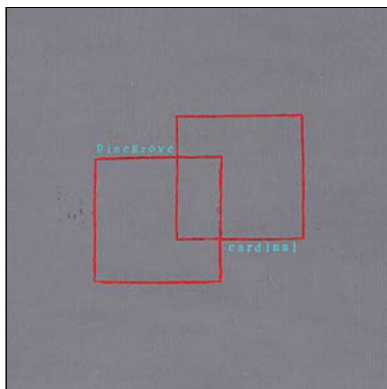
**NH** – Neil Hussey

**JK** – Jason Kennedy

**AS** – Alan Sircom

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	XR CD		200g LP
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## MUSIC REVIEW / CONTEMPORARY



### Cardinal

Pinegrove

Run For Cover

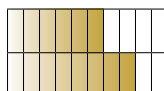


Trends come and go, but the music business shows no signs of achieving 'peak alt-country' yet. In fact, the movement seems to have grown in popularity and even if the likes of Wilco and The Bottle Rockets first appeared more than 20 years ago, bands like Pinegrove show that alt-country still has some mileage left. In fact, if you spend some time with *Cardinal*, the four-piece's first for the Run For Cover label, and you will find it has hidden depths, and shows why the movement has staying power.

On first listen, these eight laconic, unhurried acoustic slices of Americana have an 'I walk a lonely path' feel, sung by a falsetto Ryan Adams with a slight New Jersey drawl. Then you go a bit deeper and start to actually listen to the lyrics. Evan Stephens Hall is clearly a lyricist to watch, a well-schooled without veering into Morrissey-like pretention. A track like 'Aphasia' for example, is a reflective and clearly very personal look into Hall's past, with a subtle (but not too 'clever') use of off-metre "so long a-phasisa an' the waaays it kept me hid-DEN" to augment the words.

If you think alt-country is all about murder ballads, Filson shirts, and craft beer, *Cardinal* is (very nearly) the antidote. **AS**

RECORDING  
MUSIC



### Film Noir

Ran Blake

International Phonograph AN3019



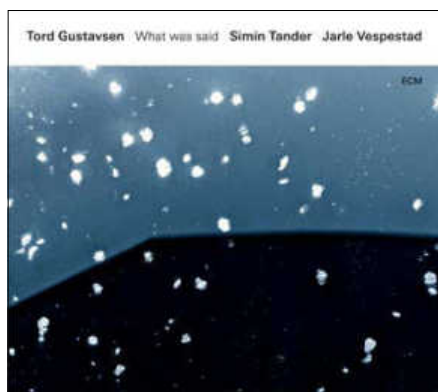
*Film Noir* is International Phonograph's seventh release, and it serves up an obscure gem of adventurous new jazz in an extremely well mastered CD, presented in a gorgeous foldout cover with an inserted set of producer and artist notes. Ran Blake combines his constant themes – classical, blues, and film noir influences. In this 1980 recording for Arista Novus, Blake provides his interpretations of themes from eleven of the greatest film noir classics, from *Doktor Mabuse* to *Touch of Evil*. Members of the New England Conservatory, Ted Curson on trumpet and John Heiss on flute accompany Blake.

This is moody, percussive music that, as film critic Andrew Sarris tells it, accesses the "dark, forbidden side of the psyche." By its very nature, it's designed to evoke a specific atmosphere, and that it does very well indeed. This is one of the gems of the Ran Blake catalogue, and for those who are open to exploring the darker side, it's music not to be missed. Mastered from Sony's analogue masters, the sound is spectacular, the piano and percussion deep and rock solid. Each new issue from Jonathan Horwich of International Phonograph is a treat, and this one in particular is a treasure. **DD**

RECORDING  
MUSIC





**What was said****Tord Gustavsen**

ECM



Some readers may be relieved to hear that reviews of Scandinavian jazz have been put on hiatus, but I'm happy to report that Norwegian pianist Tord Gustavsen strayed far enough from the conventions of genre with his latest album to still be eligible. In part because *What was said* is closer to World Music. We may still have Gustavsen's hallmark serene piano playing, but Simin Tander's voice brings a broader emotional palette to the table and the exotic language of many of the songs takes the vibe well away from northern shores. Several songs here are sung in the Afghan language Pashto; Tander has an Afghan father and German mother, which might explain why her voice on these songs is maybe the most affecting on this remarkable album.

The Pashto songs are actually of Norwegian church music, while those with English lyrics are either poetry, such as Kenneth Rexroth's 'I Refuse' or translations, or the lyrics by Jalal al-Din Rumi, a 13th century Persian philosopher and poet. This explains why the songs have so much integrity – that and the inspired way in which they are arranged and performed.

Alongside Gustavsen and Tander is the former's long time ally Jarle Vespestad, whose drum work here is more expansive and varied than usual. There are no conventional beats, little in the way of graphically defined rhythms, but rather an atmospheric

backdrop to the piano and voice. On 'I Refuse', for example, he plays what sound like larger drums with a soft stick to create a rolling undercurrent that reinforces the overall effect.

Tander's singing is very different to Kristin Ashjørnsen, the last vocalist to join Gustavsen on his 2007 release *Restored, Returned*. *What was said* is a stronger album because it plays to the pianist's strengths. While nearly all of the tracks contain vocals many finish with Gustavsen and Vespestad alone, giving them free rein to improvise together in mesmerising fashion, and sometimes with a degree of muscularity, albeit not in the keyboard-pounding sense. The master of 'quiet is the new loud', Gustavsen's piano playing on this album is up there with his very best: his first three trio albums have been held up as the pinnacle of his output, and by extension of Nordic jazz as a whole, but I would venture that *What was said* is of at least the same calibre. It restates Gustavsen's mastery of the medium and reveals that he still has a lot to say.

He has also found another instrument to say it with in the form of a Moog synthesizer. Gustavsen has long since used this instrument in a secondary role to the piano, often like a drone in Indian music. But here it adds an extra dimension that changes the cool sound of earlier releases by adding more tonal and textural range.

ECM recordings have always been good and they continue to improve. This one was made at the Rainbow Studio in Oslo by Jan Erik

Kongshaug. The control room uses Bowers & Wilkins 802 monitors, which must have helped to create the remarkable result on *What was said*, I'll make a point to spin it on the new 802s when/if I get the chance.

One of the stand out tracks is the physical 'Journey Of Life'. This combines the dynamics of the drum kit and the restraint of the piano in a particularly effective way. Another is 'Rull', where the bass keys make an all too rare appearance, which makes them all the more distinct. The power and depth is apparently unrestrained and rolls out of the system to vibrate you in ways that higher notes can never hope to.

Vocal capture is spectacular, particularly on the solo intro to 'Longing To Praise Thee'. It doesn't change when the piano and drums join in but some of its subtlety is masked by their contributions – a situation that would be lessened in more revealing systems of course. Fundamentally Tander is beguiling to listen to, especially when she sings in Pashto. This is largely because the language barrier stops literal interpretation and the distraction that brings, but it must have something to do with the 'father' tongue as well.

This is a spectacular return to form for Gustavsen, and one that takes him out of the Scandiwegian jazz ghetto and onto these august pages. You can't ask for more! **JK**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**





**Olivier Messiaen**  
**'Turangalila Symphony'**  
**Seiji Ozawa, Toronto Symphony**  
**Orchestra**

RCA Red Seal CD

RCA Red Seal Blu-spec CD

When I was a teenager, I hated classical music. To my ears, saturated by waves of over-amplified guitar rock, it all sounded prissy, passionless and overtly polite – not to mention outdated and irrelevant.

Our late 1970s school music lessons were awful, too. We would sit quietly at our desks and listen to recordings of classical music while our teacher Mr. Turner glared at us, as if daring us not to like it.

One day, he appeared with an LP tucked under his arm which looked more promising: the sleeve had a bold design with the word 'Love' written palindromically in red on a blue background beneath a white space, with a large black arrow pointing downwards. He told us it was by a twentieth century composer called Olivier Messiaen. He talked about birdsong, and God, and love and death, and some weird instrument called an ondes martenot. We were bored already.

I remember the heavy brass blasts of the opening fanfare, which almost made me jump out of my seat; and then more impressionistic recollections of clashing tonalities, coruscating percussion, and fragile, yet odd-sounding piano melodies.

The ondes martenot – an early electronic keyboard instrument –

produced eerie sounds, swooping and bleeping wildly, thrillingly redolent of 50s sci-fi films, with their unique blend of off-kilter futuristic imagery and cold-war paranoia. There was one section which sounded like a joyous, sexualised dance; a kind of erotic skew-whiff ballet. Other parts reminded me of the esoteric prog rock of bands like Yes, or the freeform flights of fancy of early Pink Floyd.

We didn't have time to listen to the whole of the piece, but even so, I left the classroom in a daze. I didn't understand this music, with its gale-force brass and winds, its crashing percussion and crazed electronic noises, but I felt it. It had moved me in a completely unexpected way. It sounded vast and hedonistic, wild and elemental; it was a riot of rhythmic complexity cast in brilliant colours and charged with a kind of blissful fury.

Messiaen had written the piece over a two-year period just after the Second World War. He derived the title from two Sanskrit words, 'turanga' and 'lila', which in Messiaen's own translation is described as "a song of love; a hymn to the superhuman joy that transcends everything."

This recording – the first major documentation of the mammoth 75-minute piece – was overseen by conductor Seiji Ozawa with the Toronto Symphony Orchestra, and was originally spread over three LP sides, with Toru Takemitsu's 'November Steps' occupying the fourth.

Even when I listen to the piece today, I'm knocked sideways by it; by its length, its inventiveness, the sheer,

almost overpowering richness of its sonic layers and striking tonalities.

My teacher, Mr. Turner, claimed to have found the record lying in the gutter next to an overflowing skip. I doubt that, but the story seemed to fit perfectly with the way the record sounded – crazed abandon and wild kinetic energy, a strange sense of otherness – that I wanted to believe it was true. Shortly afterwards, I found my own copy of the record, dusty and unloved, in the second-hand section of a local record shop.

I bought it of course, stretching my high-school pocket money, and despite buying several more versions of it over the years, it's this, now rather worn old vinyl copy that I still return to.

This is an important recording. It introduced the world to a vast work by one of the twentieth century's great musical visionaries. It also introduced a timid fourteen year-old to a new musical world of limitless boundaries.

Morton Feldman once said that he wanted to "tint the air" with his music. On the 'Turangalila Symphony' Messiaen blows holes in it!

The album has seen some useful Japanese re-releases on the RCA Red Seal label, with the Messiaen alone on CD and the complete Messiaen/Takemitsu reissue on 'Blu-spec' CD (which uses a blue laser for the recording process, but can be read on conventional Red Book CD players). **NH**

**RECORDING**  
**MUSIC**



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